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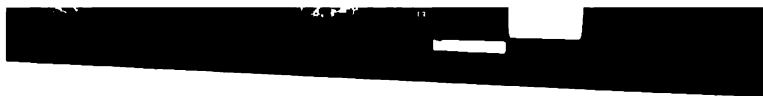
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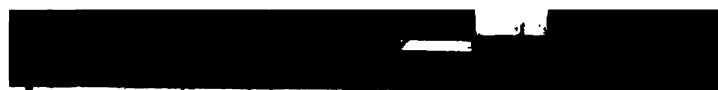


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THE CLEAN HEART

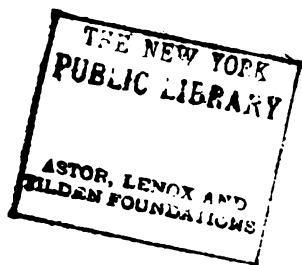
By A. S. M. HUTCHINSON

THE HAPPY WARRIOR

ONCE ABOARD THE LUGGER —

THE CLEAN HEART

IF WINTER COMES





There was about this unusual gentleman that which doubt attracted Mr. Wriford. **FRONTISPIECE.** See page 59.

THE CLEAN HEART

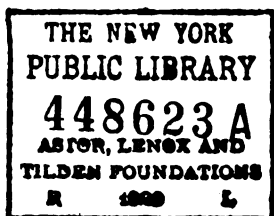
BY
A. S. M. HUTCHINSON
AUTHOR OF "THE HAPPY WARRIOR," ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
R. M. CROSBY



BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1921



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Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right
spirit within me.

The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit: a broken and
a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

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BOOK ONE

ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES



THE CLEAN HEART

BOOK ONE

ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES

CHAPTER I

MR. WRIFORD

I

HER hands were firm and cool, and his were trembling, trembling; but her eyes were laughing, laughing, and his own eyes burned.

Mr. Wriford had caught at her hands. For a brief moment, as one in great agony almost swoons in ecstasy of relief at sudden cessation of the pain, he had felt his brain swing, then float, in most exquisite calm at the peace, at the strength their firm, cool touch communicated to him. Then Mr. Wriford saw the laughing lightness in her eyes, and felt his own — whose dull, aching burn had for that instant been slaked — burn, burn anew; and felt beat up his brain that dreadful rush of blood that often in these days terrified him; and felt that lift and surge through all his pulses that sometimes reeled him on his feet; and knew that baffling lapse of thought which always followed, as though the surge were in fact a tide of affairs that flung him high

and dry and left him out of action to pick his way back — to grope back to the thread of purpose, to the train of thought, that had been snapped — if he could!

Mr. Wriford knew that the day was coming when he could not. Every time when, in the midst of ideas, of speech, of action, the surge swept him adrift and stranded him vacant and bewildered, the effort to get back was appreciably harder — the interval appreciably of greater length. The thing to do was to hang on — hang on like death while the tide surged up your brain. That sometimes left you with a recollection — a clue — that helped you back more quickly.

Mr. Wriford hung on.

The surge took him, swept him, left him. He was with Brida in Brida's jolly little flat in Knightsbridge, holding her hands. It was a longish time since he had been to see her. She had come into the room gay as ever —

Mr. Wriford got suddenly back to the point whence he had been suddenly cut adrift; remembered the surge, realised the lapse, recalled how he had caught at her hands, how they had soothed him, how, like a mock, he had seen the laughter in her eyes. Mr. Wriford threw back her hands at her with a violent motion, and went back a step, not meaning to, and knew again the frequent desire in moments of stress such as had just passed, and in moments of recovery such as he now was in, to shout out very loudly a jumble of cries of despair, as often he cried them at night, or inwardly when not alone. "O God! Oh, I say! I say! I say! Oh, this can't go on! Oh, this must end — this must end! Oh, I say! I say!" but mastered the desire and effected instead a confusion of sentences ending with "then."

A very great effort was required. Mastery of such impulses had been undermined these ten years, slipping from him these five, altogether leaving him in recent months. To give way, and to release in clamorous cries the tumult that consumed him, would ease him, he felt sure; but it would create a scene and have him stared at and laughed at, he knew. That stopped him. Fear of the betrayal of his state, that day and night he dreaded, once again saved him; and therefore in place of the loud cries, Mr. Wriford — thirty, not bad-looking, clever, successful, held to be "one of the lucky ones" — substituted heavily: "Well then! All right then! It's no good then! Very well then!"

She was a trifle surprised by the violent action with which he released her hands. But she knew his moods (not their depth) and had no comment to make on his roughness. "Oh, Phil," she cried, and her tone matched her face in its mingling of gay banter and of tenderness, "Oh, Phil, don't twist up your forehead so — frowning like that. Phil, don't!" And when he made no answer but with working face just stood there before her, she went on: "You know that I hate to see you frowning so horribly. And I don't see why you should come and do it in my flat; I'm blessed if I do!"

He did not respond to the gay little laugh with which she poked her words at him. He had come to her for the rest, for the comfort, he had felt in that brief moment when he first caught at her hands. Instead, the laughter in her eyes informed him that here, here also, was not to be found what day and night he sought. The interview must be ended, and he must get away. He was in these days always fidgeting to end a conversation, however eagerly he had begun it.

It must be ended — conventionally.

"Well, I'm busy," he said. "I must be going."

"Now, Phil!" she exclaimed, and there was in her voice just a trace of pleading. "Now, Phil, don't be in one of your moods! It's not kind after all the ages I've never seen you." A settee was near her, and she sat down and indicated the place beside her. "Going! Why, you've scarcely come! Tell me what you've been doing. Months since you've been near me! Of course, I've heard about you. I'm always hearing your name or seeing it in the papers. Clever little beast, Phil! I hear people talking about *The Week Reviewed*, or about your books; and I say: 'Oh, I know the editor well'; or 'He's a friend of mine — Philip Wriford,' and I feel rather bucked when they exclaim and want to know what you're like. You must be making pots of money, Phil, old boy."

He remained standing, making no motion to accept the place beside her. "I'm making what I should have thought would be a good lot once," he said; and he added: "You ought to have married me, Brida — when you had the chance."

Just the faintest shadow flickered across her face. But she replied with a little wriggle and a little laugh indicative of a shuddering at her escape. "It would have been too awful," she said. "You, with your moods! You're getting worse, Phil, you are really!"

He had seen the shadow. Had it stayed, he had crossed to her, caught her hands again, cried: "O Brida, Brida!" and in that shadow's tenderness have found the balm which in these days he craved for, craved for, craved for. He saw it pass and took instead the mock of her light tone and words. "Worse — yes, I know

I'm worse," he said violently. "You don't know how bad — nor any one."

"Tell me, old boy."

"There's nothing to tell."

"You're working too hard, Phil."

"I'm sick of hearing that. That's all rubbish."

"Poor old boy!"

She saw his face work again; but "It's our press night," was all he said. "We go to press to-night. I've the House of Commons' debate to read and an article to write — two articles. I must go, Brida."

She told him: "Well, you won't get the debate yet. It's much too early. Do sit down, Phil. Here, by my side, and talk, Phil, do!"

He shook his head and took up his hat; and she could see how his hand that held it trembled. He was at the door with no more than "Good-bye" when she sprang to her feet and called him back: "At least shake hands, rude beast!" and when he gave his hand, she held it. "What's up, old boy?"

He drew his hand away. "Nothing, Brida."

"Just now — when you first came — what did you mean by saying: 'All right then — it's no good then.' What did you mean by that, Phil?"

His face, while she waited his reply, was working as though it mirrored clumsy working of his brain. His words, when he found speech, were blurred and spasmodic, as though his brain that threw them up were a machine gone askew and leaking under intense internal stress, where it should have delivered in an amiable flow. "Why, I meant that it's no good," he said, "no good looking for what I can't find. I don't know what it is, even. Brida, I don't even know what it is that I

want. Peace — rest — happiness — getting back to what I used to be. I don't know. I can't explain. I can't even explain to myself — ”

“ Why, old boy? ”

“ I can do it at night. Sometimes I can get near it at night. Sometimes I lie awake at night and call myself all the vile, vile names I can think of. Go through the alphabet and find a name for what I am with every letter. But at the back of it — at the back of it there's still — still a reservation, still an excuse for myself. I want to tell some one. I want to find some one to tell it all to — to say ‘ I'm This and That and This and That, and Oh! for God Almighty's sake help me — help me — ’ ”

She knew his moods, and of their depth more at this interview than ever before, and yet still in no wise fathomed them. He stopped, twisted in mind and in face with his efforts, and she (his moods unplumbed) laughed, thinking to rally him, and said: “ Why, no, it's no good calling yourself names to me, Phil.”

He broke out more savagely than he had yet spoken, and he had been violent enough:

“ That's what I'm telling you. No good — no good! You'd laugh. You're laughing now. Everybody laughs. I'm lucky! — so successful! — so happy! — no cares! — no ties! — no troubles! Other people have bad times! — others are ill! — breakdowns and God knows what, and responsibilities, and burdens, and misfortunes! but me! — I've all the luck — I've everything! — ”

When she could stop him, she said: “ I don't laugh at you, Phil. That's not fair.”

“ You always do. I thought I'd come to you to-day to see. I always come to you hoping. But I always

go away knowing I'm a fool to have troubled. Well, I won't come again. I always say that to myself. Now I've said it to you. Now it's fixed. I won't come back again. It's done — it's over!"

She put out her hand and touched his. "Now, Phil!"

But he shook off her touch. "You don't understand me. That's what it comes to."

"Phil!"

"No one does. You least of all."

"Phil, you're ill, old boy."

"Well, laugh over that!" cried Mr. Wriford and turned with a shuffling movement of his feet; and she saw him blunder against the door-post as though he had not noticed it; and stood listening while he went heavily down the stairs; and heard him fumble with the latch below and slam the outer door behind him.

II

Now you shall picture this Mr. Wriford — thirty, youthful of face, not bad-looking, clever, successful, one of the lucky ones — walking back from Brida's little flat in Knightsbridge to the office of *The Week Reviewed* off Fleet Street, and as he walked, rehearsing every passage of his own contribution to the interview that had just passed, and as he rehearsed them, abusing himself in every line of it. It was not where he had been rude or unkind to Brida that gave him distress. There, on the contrary, he found brief gleams of satisfaction. There he had held his own. It was where he had made a fool of himself and exposed himself that gnawed him. It was where she had laughed at him that he was stung. He made an effort to distract his thoughts, to fix them

on the work to which he was proceeding, to attach them anywhere (" Anywhere, anywhere, any infernal where! " cried Mr. Wriford to himself). Useless. They rushed back. " From here to that pillar-box," cried Mr. Wriford inwardly, " I'll fix on what I'm going to write in my first leader." He was not ten steps in the direction when he was writhing again at having made a fool of himself with Brida. It was always so in these days. " I never exchange words with a soul," cried Mr. Wriford, " not even with a cab-driver — " He was switched off on the word to recollection of a fare-dispute with a cab-driver on the previous day. He was plunged back into the humiliation he had suffered himself to endure by not taking a strong line with the man. It had occupied him, gnawing, gnawing at him right up to this afternoon with Brida, when new mortification, new example of having been a weak fool, of having been worsted in an encounter, had come to take its place.

So there was Mr. Wriford — one of the lucky ones — back with this old gnawing again; and, realising the swift transition from one to the other, able to complete his broken sentence with a bitter laugh at himself for the instance that had come to illustrate it.

" I never exchange a word with a soul, not even with a cab-driver," cried Mr. Wriford, " but I show what a weak fool I am, and then brood over it, brood over it, until the next thing comes along to take its place!" Whereupon, and with which, another next thing came immediately in further proof and in further assault upon the thin film of Mr. Wriford's self-possession that was in these days left to him. In form, this came, of a cyclist carrying a bundle of newspapers upon his back and travelling at the hazard and speed and with the

dexterity that belong to his calling. Mr. Wriford stepped off the pavement to cross the road, stepped in front of this gentleman, caused him to execute a prodigious swerve to avoid collision, ejaculated very genuinely a "Sorry—I'm awfully sorry," and was addressed in raucous bawl of obscene abuse that added new terms to the names which, as he had told Brida, he often lay awake at night and called himself.

Mr. Wriford gained the other side of the road badly jarred as to his nerves but conscious only of this fresh outrage to his sensibilities. Was it that he looked a fool that he was treated with such contempt? Yes, that was it! Would that coarse brute have dared abuse in that way a man who looked as if he could hold his own? No, not he! Would a man who was a man and not a soft, contemptible beast have cried "Sorry. I'm awfully sorry"? No, no! A man who was a man had damned the fellow's eyes, shouted him down, threatened him for his blundering carelessness. He was hateful. He was vile. Now this — now this indignity, this new exhibition of his weakness, was going to rankle, gnaw him, gnaw him. There surged over Mr. Wriford again, standing on the kerb, the desire to wave his arms and cry aloud, as he had desired to wave and cry with Brida a few minutes before: "Oh! I say! I say! I say! This can't go on! This can't go on! This has got to stop! This has got to stop!" Habit checked the impulse. People were passing. People were staring at him. They had seen the incident, perhaps. They had witnessed his humiliation and were laughing at him. There was wrung out of Mr. Wriford's lips a bitter cry, a groan, that was articulate sound of his inward agony at himself. He turned in his own direction and began a swift

walk that was the slowest pace to which habit could control the desire that consumed him to run, to run — by running to escape his thoughts, by running to shake off the inward mocking that mocked him as though with mocking all the street resounded. It appeared indeed to Mr. Wriford, as often in these days it appeared, that passers-by looked at him longer than commonly one meets a casual glance, and had in their eyes a grin as though they knew him for what he was and needs must grin at the sight of it. Mr. Wriford often turned to look after such folk to see if they were turned to laugh at him. He had not now gone a dozen furious paces, yet twice had wavered beneath glances directed at him, when there greeted him cheerily with "Hullo, Wriford! How goes it?" a healthy-looking gentleman who stopped before him and caused him to halt.

III

Mr. Wriford, desperate to be alone and to run, to run, said: "Hullo, I'm late getting to the office. I'm in a tearing hurry," and stared at the man, aware of another frequent symptom of these days: he could not recollect his name! He knew the man well. Scarcely a day passed but Mr. Wriford saw him. This was the literary editor of *The Intelligence*, the great daily newspaper with which *The Week Reviewed* was connected and in whose office it was housed. A nice man, and of congenial tastes; but a man whom at that moment Mr. Wriford felt himself hating venomously, and while he struggled, struggled for his name, experienced the conscious wish that the man might fall down dead and so let him be free, and so close those eyes of his that seemed to

Mr. Wriford to be looking right inside him and to be grinning at what they saw. And Mr. Wriford found himself gone miles adrift among pictures of the scenes that would occur if the man did suddenly drop dead; found himself shaping the sentences that he would speak to the policeman who would come up, shaping the words with which, as he supposed would be his duty, he would go and break the news to the man's wife, whom he knew well, and whose shocked grief he found himself picturing — but whose name! Mr. Wriford came back to the original horror, to the fact of standing before this familiar — daily familiar — friend and having not the remotest glimmering of what his name might be. . . .

"I'm off to-morrow for a month's holiday," the man was saying. "A rest cure. I've been needing it, my doctor says. You're looking fit, Wriford."

Habit helped Mr. Wriford to work up a smile. Just what he had been saying to Brida: "I'm so lucky! Other people have bad times! — others are ill! — breakdowns and God knows what! — but me! — I've all the luck!" Mr. Wriford worked up a smile. "Oh, good Lord, yes. I'm always fit. Sorry you're bad." What was his name? — his name! his name!

And the man went on: "You are so! — lucky beggar! When's your new book coming out? What, must you cut? Well, I'll see you again before I go. I'm looking in at the office to-night. I've left you a revised proof of that article of mine. That was a good suggestion of yours. One of the bright ones, you! So long!"

Mr. Wriford — one of the bright ones — shook hands with him; and knew as he did so, and from the man's slight surprise, that it was a stupid thing to do with a man he met every day of his life; and leaving him, be-

came for some moments occupied with this new example of his stupidity; and then back to the distress that he could not, could not recollect his name; and furiously, then, to the agony of the cyclist humiliation; and in all the chaos of it got to a quiet street, and, hurrying at frantic pace, frantically at last did cry aloud: "Oh, I say! I say! I say! I say! This can't go on. This has got to stop! This has got to stop!" and found himself somehow arrived at the vast building of *The Intelligence*, and at the sight by habit called upon himself and steadied himself to enter.

IV

Called upon himself. . . . Steadied himself. . . . He would encounter here men whom he knew. . . . He must not let them see. . . . Called upon himself and passed up the stairs towards the landing that held the offices of his paper. There was a lift, but he did not use it. It would have entailed exchange of greeting with the lift-boy, and in these days Mr. Wriford had come to the pitch of shrinking from even the amount of conversation which that would have entailed. For the same reason he paused a full three minutes on his landing before turning along the corridor that approached his office. There were bantering voices which he recognised for those of friends, and he waited till the group dispersed and doors slammed. He hated meeting people, shrank from eyes that looked, not at him, but, as he felt, into him, and, as he believed, had a grin in the tail of them.

Doors slammed. Silence in the corridor. Mr. Wriford went swiftly to his room. The table was littered

with proofs and letters. Mr. Wriford sat down heavily in his chair and took up the office telephone. There was one thing to straighten up before he got to work, and he spoke to the voice that answered him: "Do you know if the literary editor is in his room? The literary editor — Mr. — Mr. — ?"

"Mr. Haig, sir," said the voice. "No, sir, Mr. Haig won't be back till late. He left word that he'd put his proof on your table, sir."

"Thanks," said Mr. Wriford. "Get through to the sub-editors' room and ask Mr. Hatchard if I may have the Commons' debate report."

Then Mr. Wriford put down the telephone and leaned his head on his hands. "Haig! Of course that was his name! Oh, I say! I say! I say!"

CHAPTER II

YOUNG WRIFORD

I

COME back with Mr. Wriford a little. Come back with him a little to scenes where often his mind, not wanders, but hunts — hunts desperately, as hunts for safety, running in panic to and fro, one trapped by the sea on whom the tide advances. There are nights — not occasional nights, but night after night, night after night — when Mr. Wriford cannot sleep and when, in madness against the sleep that will not come, he visions sleep as some actual presence that is in his room mocking him, and springs from his bed to grapple it and seize it and drag it to his pillow. There is a moment then — or longer, he does not know how long — of dreadful loss of identity, in which in the darkness Mr. Wriford flounders and smashes about his room, thinking he wrestles with sleep: and then he realises, and trembling gets back to bed, and cries aloud to know how in God's name to get out of this pass to which he has come, and how in pity's name he has come to it.

Come back with him a little. Look how his life as he hunts through it falls into periods. Look how these bring him from Young Wriford that he was — Young Wriford fresh, ardent, keen, happy, to whom across the years he stretches trembling hands — to this Mr. Wriford, one of the lucky ones, that he has become.

II

Here is Young Wriford of ten years before who has just taken the tremendous plunge into what he calls literature. Here he is, just battling ardently with its fearful hopes and hazards when there comes to him news of Bill and Freda, his brother and sister-in-law, killed by sudden accident in Canada where with their children and Alice, Freda's elder sister, they had made their home. Here he is at the Liverpool docks, meeting Alice and the three little boys to take them to her mother's house in Surbiton. He is the only surviving near relative of Bill's family, and here he is, for old Bill's sake, with every impulse concentrated on playing the game by old Bill's poor little kids and by Alice who, unhappy at home, has always lived with them and been their "deputy-mother," and is now, as she says, their own mother: here is Alice, with Harold aged nine, Dicky aged eight, and Freddie aged seven; Alice, who dreads coming to her home, who tells Young Wriford in the train:

"I'm not crying for Freda and Bill. I can't — I simply can't realise that even yet. It's not them, Philip. It's the future I'm thinking of. Phil, what's going to happen to my darlings? They've got nothing — nothing. Father's got four hundred a year — less; and I dread that. I tell you I dread meeting mother and father more than anything. Mother means to be kind — it's kind of her to take the children for Freda's sake; but you know what she is and what father is. And I've nothing — nothing!"

Young Wriford knows well enough what Mrs. Filmer is. Dragon Mrs. Filmer he has privately called her to old Bill when writing of duty calls paid to the stuffy little house at Surbiton, where the Dragon dragons it over her establishment and over Mr. Filmer, who has "retired" from business and who calls himself an "inventor." Young Wriford knows, and he has thought it all out, and he has had an amazing piece of success only a fortnight before, and he answers Alice bravely: "Look here, old girl, I've simply colossal news for you. You've not got to worry about all that a damn — sorry, Alice, but not a damn, really. You know I've chucked the office and gone in for literature? Well, what do you think? Whatever do you think? I'm dashed if I haven't got a place on the staff of Gamber's! Gamber's, mind you! You know — *Gamber's Magazine* and *Gamber's Weekly* and skits of other papers. They'd been accepting stuff of mine, and they wrote and asked me to call, and — well, I'm on the staff! I've got a roll-top desk of my own and no end of an important position and — what do you think? — three guineas a week! Well, this is how it stands; I've figured it all out. I can live like a prince on twenty-five bob a week, and you're going to have the other one pound eighteen. No, it's no good saying you won't. You've got to. Good Lord, it's for old Bill I'm doing it. Well, look at that now! Nothing! Why, you can tell Mrs. Filmer you've got practically a hundred a year! Ninety-eight pounds sixteen. That's not bad, is it? and twice as much before long. I tell you I'm going to make a fortune at this. I simply love the work, you know. No, don't call it generous, old girl, or any rot like that. It's not generous. I don't want the money. I mean, I don't care

for anything except the work. There, now you feel better, don't you? It's fixed. I tell you it's fixed."

III

Here is Young Wriford with this fixed, and with it working, as he believes, splendidly. Here he is living in a bed-sitting-room at Battersea, and revelling day and night and always in the thrill of being what he calls a literary man, and in the pride and glory of being on the staff at Gamber's. He loves the work. He cares for nothing else but the work. That is why the shrewd men at Gamber's spotted him and brought him in and shoved him into Gamber's machine; and that is why he never breaks or crumples but springs and comes again when the hammers, the furnaces, and the grindstones of Gamber's machine work him and rattle him and mould him.

A Mr. Occshott controls Gamber's machine. Mr. Occshott in appearance and in tastes is much more like a cricket professional than Young Wriford's early ideas of an editor. Literary young men on Gamber's staff call Mr. Occshott a soulless ox and rave aloud against him, and being found worthless by him, are flung raving out of Gamber's machine, which he relentlessly drives. In Young Wriford, Mr. Occshott tells himself that he has found a real red-hot 'un, and for the ultimate benefit of Gamber's he puts the red-hot 'un through the machine at all its fiercest; sighs and groans at Young Wriford, and checks him here and checks him there, and badgers him and drives him all the time — slashes his manuscripts to pieces; comes down with contemptuous blue pencil and a cutting sneer whenever in them

Young Wriford gets away from facts and tries a flight of fancy; hunts for missed errors through proofs that Young Wriford has read, and finds them and sends for Young Wriford, and asks if it is his eyesight or his education that is at fault, and if it is of the faintest use to hope that he can ever be trusted to pass a proof for himself; puts Young Wriford on to "making-up" pages of Gamber's illustrated periodicals for press, and pulls them all to pieces after they are done, and sends Young Wriford himself to face the infuriated printer and to suffer dismay and mortification in all his soul as he hears the printer say: "Well, that's the limit! Take my oath, that's the limit! 'Bout time, Mr. Wriford, you give my compliments to Mr. Occshott and tell him I wish to God Almighty he'd put any gentleman on to make up the pages except you. It's waste labour — it's sheer waste labour — doing anything you tell us. Take my oath it is."

Young Wriford assures himself that he hates Mr. Occshott, but steadily learns, steadily benefits; finds that he really likes Mr. Occshott and is liked by him; steadily, ardently sticks to it — earns his reward.

"Well, there it is," says Mr. Occshott one day, throwing aside the manuscript over which Young Wriford had taken infinite pains only to have it horribly mangled. "There it is. Have another shot at it, Wriford. And, by the way, you're not doing badly — not badly. You're awfully careless, you know, but I think you're picking it up. We're starting a new magazine, a kind of popular monthly review, and I'm going to put you in nominal charge of it — charge of the make-up and seeing to press and all that. And your salary — you've been here six months, haven't you? Three guineas."

you're getting? Well, it'll be four now. Make a real effort with this new idea, Wriford. I'll tell you more about it to-morrow. A real effort — you really must, you know. Well, there it is."

IV

Here is Young Wriford not quite so youthful as a few months before. He has lost his keen interest in games and recreation. He thinks nothing but work, breathes nothing but work; most significant symptom of all, sometimes dreams work or lies awake at night a little because his mind is occupied with work. That in itself, though, is nothing: he likes it, he relishes every moment of it. What accounts more directly for the slight loss of youthfulness, what increasingly interferes with his relish of his work, is what comes up from the Filmer household at Surbiton in form of frequent letters from Alice; is what greets him there when he fulfils Alice's entreaties by giving up his every week-end to spending it as Dragon Mrs. Filmer's guest.

The letters begin to worry him, to get on his nerves, to give him for some reason that he cannot quite determine a harassing feeling of self-reproach. They are inordinately long; they consist from beginning to end of a recital of passages-at-arms between Alice and her parents; they seem to hint, when in replies to them he tries to reason away the troubles, that it is all very well for Young Wriford, who is out of it all and free and comfortable and happy, but that if he were here —!

"Well, but what more can I do than I am doing?" Young Wriford cries aloud to himself on receipt of such a letter; and thenceforward that question and alternate

fits of impatience and of self-reproach over it, and letters expressive first of one frame of mind and then, in remorse, of the other — thenceforward these occupy more and more of his thoughts, and more and more mix with his work and disturb his peace of mind. Why is all this put upon him? Why can't he be left alone?

V

Here is Young Wriford in love. She is eighteen. Her name is Brida. She is working for the stage at a school of dramatic art quite close to Gamber's. He gets to know her through a friend at Gamber's whose sister is also at the school. Young Wriford and Brida happen to lunch every day — meeting without arrangement — at the same tea-shop off the Strand. She leaves her school at the same hour he leaves Gamber's in the evening, and they happen to meet every evening — without arrangement — and he walks home with her across St. James's Park to a Belgravia flat where she lives with her married sister. Young Wriford thinks of her face, day and night, as like a flower — radiant and fresh and fragrant as a flower at dawn; and of her spirit as a flower — gay as a posy, fragrant as apple-blossom, fresh as a rose, a rose!

And so one Friday evening as they cross the Park together, when suddenly she challenges his unusual silence with: "I say, you're jolly glum to-night," he replies with a plump: "I'm going to call you Brida."

"Oh, goodness!" says Brida and begins to walk very fast.

"Do you mind?"

She shakes her head.

"Don't let's hurry. Stop here a moment."

It is dusk. It is October. There is no one near them. He begins to speak. His eyes tell her what he can scarcely say: her eyes and that which tides in deepest colour across her face inform him what her answer is. He takes her in his arms. He tells her: "I love you, darling. Brida, I love you." She whispers: "Phil!"

He goes home exalted in his every pulse by what he has drunk from her lips: plumed, armed, caparisoned by that ethereal draught for any marvels, challenging the future to bring out its costliest, mightiest, bravest, best — he'd have it, he'd wrest it for his sweet, his darling! He goes home — and there is Alice waiting for him. Can't he, oh, can't he come down to Surbiton to-night, Friday, instead of waiting till to-morrow? She simply cannot bear it down there without him. It's all right when he is there. When she's alone with her mother, her mother goes on and on and on about the expenses, and about the children, and seems to throw the blame on Bill, and she answers back, and her father joins in, and there they are — at it! There's been a worse scene than ever to-day. She can't face meeting them at supper without Phil. "Phil, you'll come, won't you?"

Here is Young Wriford twisting his hands and twisting his brows, as often in later years he comes to twist them. He had planned to spend all to-morrow and Sunday with Brida — not go to Surbiton at all this week-end. Now he must go to-night. Why? Why on earth should this kind of thing be put on him? He tries to explain to Alice that he cannot come — either to-day or to-morrow.

She cries. He lets her cry and lets her go — doing his best to make her think him not wilfully unkind. Here he is left alone in torment of self-reproach and of anger at the position he is placed in. Here he is with the self-reproach mastering him, and writing excuses to Brida, and hurrying to catch a train that will get him down to Surbiton in time for supper. Here is Dragon Mrs. Filmer greeting him with: "Well, this *is* unexpected! You couldn't of course have sent a line saying you were coming to-night instead of to-morrow! Oh, no, I mustn't expect that! My convenience goes for nothing in my own house nowadays. I call it rather hard on me." Here is Mr. Filmer, with his face exactly like a sheep, who replies at supper when Young Wriford lets out that he has been to a theatre-gallery during the week: "Well, I must say some people are very lucky to be able to afford such things. I'm afraid they don't come our way. We have a good many mouths to feed in this household, haven't we, Alice, h'm, ha?"

Here is Young Wriford in bed, pitying himself, reproaching himself, thinking of Brida, thinking of the Filmers, thinking of old Bill, thinking of Alice, thinking of his work . . . pitying himself; hating himself for doing it; in a tangle; in a torment. . . .

VI

Here is Young Wriford beginning to chafe at Gamber's. Here he is beginning to find himself — wanting to do better work than the heavy hand of Mr. Occsh will admit to the popular pages of Gamber periodicals and beginning to lose himself — feeling the effect many different strains; growing what Brida c

"nervy"; slowly changing from ardent Young Wriford to "nervy" Mr. Wriford.

The different strains all clash. There is no rest between them nor relief in any one of them. They all involve "scenes" — scenes with Brida, who has left the dramatic school and is on the London stage, who thinks that if Young Wriford really cared tuppence about her he would give up an occasional Sunday to her — but no, he spends them all at Surbiton and when he does come near her is "nervy" and seems to expect her to be sentimental and sorry for him; scenes with the Filmers and even with Alice because now when he comes down to them he doesn't, as they tell him, "seem to think of their dull lives" but wants to shut himself up and work at the novel or whatever it is that he is writing; scenes with Mr. Occshott when he brings Mr. Occshott the "better work" that he tries to do during the week-ends and at night and is told that he is wasting his time doing that sort of thing.

Is he wasting his time? Yes, he is wasting it at Gamber's, he tells himself. He can do better work. He wants to do better work. No scope for it at Gamber's, and one day he has it out with Mr. Occshott. Mr. Occshott hands back to him, kindly but rather vexedly, a series of short stories which is of the "better work" he feels he can do. Young Wriford sends the stories to a rival magazine of considerably higher standard than Gamber's, purposely putting upon them what seems to him an outrageous price. They are accepted.

That settles it. Young Wriford goes to Mr. Occshott. "I'm sorry, sir — awfully sorry. I've been very happy here. You've been awfully good to me. But I want to do bet— other work. I'm going to resign."

Mr. Occshott is extraordinarily kind. Young Wriford finds himself quite affected by all that Mr. Occshott says. Mr. Occshott is not going to let Gamber's lose Young Wriford at any price. "Is it money?" he asks at last.

"Yes, it's money — partly," Young Wriford tells him. "But I don't want you to think I'm trying to bounce a rise out of you."

"My dear chap, of course I don't think so," says Mr. Occshott. "You're getting five pounds a week. What's your idea?"

"I think I ought to be making four hundred a year," says Wriford.

"So do I," says Mr. Occshott and laughs. "All right. You are. Is that all right?"

Young Wriford is overwhelmed. He had never expected this. He hesitates. He almost agrees. But it is only, as he had said, "partly" a question of money. It is the better work that really he wants. It is the constant chafing against the Gamber limitations that really actuates him. He knows what it will be if he stays on. He is quite confident of himself if he resists this temptation and leaves. He says: "No. It's awfully good of you — awfully good. But it's not only the question of money"; and then he fires at Mr. Occshott a bombshell which blows Mr. Occshott blazes.

"I'm writing a novel," says Young Wriford.

"Oh, my God!" says Mr. Occshott and covers face with his hands.

There is no room in any well-regulated popular periodical office for a young man who is writing a novel. It is over. It is done. Good-bye to Gamber's!

VII

And immediately the catastrophe, the crash; the springing upon Young Wriford of that which finally and definitely is to catch him and hunt him and drive him from the Young Wriford that he is to the Mr. Wriford that he is to be; the scene that follows when he tells Alice and the Filmers what he has done.

He tells them enthusiastically. In this moment of his first release from Gamber's to pursue the better work that he has planned, he forgets the depression that always settles upon him in the Surbiton establishment, and speaks out of the ardour and zest of successes soon to be won that, apart from the joy of telling it all to some one, makes him more than ever grudge this week-end visit when work is impossible. He finishes and then for the first time notices the look upon the faces of his listeners. He finishes, and there is silence, and he stares from one to the other and has sudden foreboding at what he sees but no foreboding of that which comes to pass.

Alice is first to speak. "Oh, Phil," says Alice — trembling voice and trembling lips. "Oh, Phil! Left Gamber's!"

Then Mr. Filmer. "Well, really!" says Mr. Filmer. "Well, really — h'm, ha!"

Then Mrs. Filmer. "This I did not expect. This I refuse to believe. Left Gamber's! I cannot believe anything so hard on me as that. I cannot."

Young Wriford manages to say: "Well, why not?" and at once there is released upon him by Mr. and Mrs.

Filmer the torrent that seems to him to last for hour and hours.

Why not! Is he aware that they were awaiting his arrival this very week-end to tell him what it had become useless to suppose he would ever see for himself? Why not! Does he realise that the expenses of feeding and clothing and above all of educating Bill's children are increasing beyond endurance month by month as they grow up? Why not! Has he ever taken the trouble to look at the boys' clothes, at their boots, and to realise how his brother's children have to be dressed in rags while he lives in luxury in London? Has he ever taken the trouble to do that? Perhaps his lordship who can afford to throw up a good position will condescend to do so now; and Mrs. Filmer takes breath from her raving and rushes to the door and bawls up the stairs "Harold! Fred! Dicky! Come and show your clothes to your kind uncle! Come and hear what your kind uncle has done! Harold! Freddie — !"

Young Wriford, seated at the table, his head in his hands: "Oh, don't! Oh, for God's sake, don't!"

"Don't!" cries Mrs. Filmer. "No, don't let you be troubled by it! It's what our poor devoted Alice has to see day after day. It's what Mr. Filmer and I have to screw ourselves to death to try to prevent."

"And their schooling," says Mr. Filmer. "And their schooling, h'm, ha."

Schooling! This settles their schooling, Mrs. Filmer cries. They'll have to leave their day-schools now. He'll have the pleasure of seeing his brother's children attending the board-school. Three miserable guineas a week he's been contributing to the expenses, and was to be told to-day it was insufficient, and here he

is with the news that he has left Gamber's! Here he is —

"Good God!" cries Young Wriford. "Good God, why didn't you tell me all this before?" and then, as at this the storm breaks upon him again, gets to his feet and cries distractedly: "Stop it! Stop it!" and then breaks down and says: "I'm sorry — I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. It's come all of a blow at me, all this. I never knew. I never dreamt it. It'll be all right. If you'll let me alone, I swear it'll be all right. The three guineas won't stop. I've arranged to do two weekly articles for Gamber's for three guineas on purpose to keep Alice going. I can get other work. There's other work I've heard of — only I wanted to do better — of course that doesn't matter now. Look here, if the worst comes to the worst, I'll go back to Gamber's. They'll take me back if I promise to give up the work I want to do. I'm sorry. I never realised. I never thought about all that. I'm sorry."

He is sorry. That, both now and for the years that are to come, is his chief thought — his daily, desperate anxiety: sorry to think how he has let his selfish ideas of better work, his thoughts of marrying Brida, blind him to his duty to devoted Alice and to old Bill's kids. Think of her life here! Think of those poor little beggars growing up and the education they ought to have, the careers old Bill would have wished them to enter! He is so sorry that only for one sharp moment does he cry out in utter dread at the proposal which now Mrs. Filmer, a little mollified, fixes upon him.

"In any case," says Mrs. Filmer, "whatever you manage to do or decide to do, you'd better come and live here. You can live far more cheaply here than

letting a London landlady have part of your income."

Only for one sharp moment he protests. "I couldn't!" Young Wriford cries. "I couldn't work here. I simply couldn't."

"You can have a nice table put in your bedroom," says Mrs. Filmer. "If you're really sorry, if you really intend to do your duty by your brother's children —"

"All right," says Young Wriford. "It's very kind of you. All right."

VIII

He does not return to Gamber's. He is one of the lucky ones. The great daily newspaper, the *Intelligence*, has a particular fame for its column of leaderettes and latterly is forever throwing out those who write them in search of one who shall restore them to their old reputation (recently a little clouded). Young Wriford puts in for the post and gets it and holds it and soon couples with it much work on the literary side of the paper. There is a change in the proprietorship of the penny evening paper, the *Piccadilly Gazette*, bringing in one who turns the paper upside down to fill with new features. Young Wriford puts in specimens of a column of facetious humour — "Hit Miss" — and it is established forthwith, and even morning he is early at the *Piccadilly Gazette* office produce it.

Thus within a very few weeks of leaving Gamt and of coming to live at Surbiton, he is earning more than twice as much as he had relinquished — proving himself most manifestly one of the lucky ones.

earning the money and the reputation at cost to himself of which only himself is aware.

He is from the house at seven each morning to reach the *Piccadilly Gazette* by eight, hunting through the newspapers as the train takes him up for paragraphs wherewith to be funny in "Hit or Miss." There are days, and gradually they become more frequent, when nothing funny will come to his mind; when his mind is hopelessly tired; when his column is flogged out amid furious protests and expostulations informing him that he is keeping the whole damned paper waiting; when he leaves the office badly shaken, cursing it, hating it, dreading that this day's work will earn him dismissal from it, and hurries back to the "nice table" in his bedroom at Surbiton, there desperately to attack the two weekly articles for Gamber's, the book-reviewing for the *Intelligence* and the work upon his novel: that "better work," opportunity for which had caused him to leave Mr. Occshott and now is immeasurably harder to find.

He gets into the habit of trying to enter the house noiselessly and noiselessly to get to his room. He comes back to the house trying to forget his misgiving about his "Hit or Miss" column and to force his mind to concentrate on the work he now has to do: above all, trying to avoid meeting any one in the house, which means, if he succeeds, avoiding "a scene" caused by his overwrought nerves. He never does succeed. There is always a scene. It is either irritation with Alice or with one of the boys who delay him or interrupt him, and then regret and remorse at having shown his temper; or it is a scene of wilder nature with Dragon Mrs. Filmer or with Mr. Filmer. Whatever the scene, the

result is the same — inability for an hour, for two hours, for all the morning, properly to concentrate upon his work.

It will be perhaps the matter of his room. The servant is making the bed, or it isn't made, and he knows he will be interrupted directly he starts.

Pounce comes Dragon Mrs. Filmer.

"Well, goodness knows I leave the house early enough," says Young Wriford.

"Goodness knows you do," says Mrs. Filmer.
"Breakfast at half-past six!"

"I never get it."

"You're never down for it."

Young Wriford, face all twisted: "Oh, what's the good! We're not talking about that. It's about my room."

Mrs. Filmer, lips compressed: "Certainly it's about your room, and perhaps you'll tell me how the servants —"

Young Wriford: "All I'm saying is that I don't see why my room shouldn't be done first."

Mr. Filmer (attracted to the battle): "I'm sure if as much were done for me as is done for you in this establishment — h'm, ha."

Alice (come to the rescue): "You know, Philip, you said you thought you wouldn't get back till lunch this morning."

Young Wriford, staring at them all, feeling incoherent, furious ravings working within him, with a despairing gesture: "Oh, all right, all right, *all right!* I'm sorry. Don't go on about it. Just let me alone. I'm all behindhand. I'm —"

In this mood he begins his work. This is the mood

that has to be fought down before any of the work can be successfully done. Often a day will reward him virtually nothing. He is always behindhand, always trying to catch up. At six he rushes from the house to get to the *Intelligence* office. He is rarely back again to bed by one o'clock: from the house again at seven.

IX

Now the thing has Young Wriford and rushes him: now grips him and drives him, now marks him and drops him as he takes it. Now the years run. Now to the last drop the Young Wriford is squeezed out of him: Mr. Wriford now. Now men name him for one of the lucky ones. Now, as he lies awake at night, and as he trembles as he walks by day, he hates himself and pities himself and dreads himself.

Now the years run — flash by Mr. Wriford — bringing him much and losing him all; flash and are gone. Now he might leave the Filmer household and live again by himself. But there is no leaving it, once he is of it. Alice wants him, and he tells himself it is his duty to stay by her. His money is wanted, and there never leaves him the dread of suddenly losing his work and bringing them all to poverty. Now he gives up other work and is of the *Intelligence* alone, handsomely paid, one of the lucky ones. It gives him no satisfaction. It would have thrilled Young Wriford, but Young Wriford is dead. Now there is no pinching in the Surbiton establishment, decided comfort rather. The boys are put to good schools and shaped for good careers. The establishment itself is moved to larger and pleasanter accommodation. Alice is grateful, the boys are happy, even the

Filmers are grateful. That Young Wriford who sat in the train with Alice coming down from Liverpool eight years before and planned so enthusiastically and schemed so generously would have been happy, proud, delighted to have done it all. But that Young Wriford is dead. Mr. Wriford spends nothing on himself because he wants nothing — interests, tastes other than work, are confined in Young Wriford's grave. Mr. Wriford just produces the money and begs — nervily as ever, nay, more nervily than before — to be let alone to work; he is always behindhand.

Now the novel is at last written and is published and flames into success. Imagine Young Wriford's amazed delight! But Young Wriford is dead. Mr. Wriford, one of the lucky ones, lucky in this as in all the rest, contracts handsomely for others and at once is in the rush of fulfilling a contract; that is all.

Now Alice is taken sick — mortally sick. Lingers a long while, wants Mr. Wriford badly to sit with her and wants him always, is only upset by her mother. Young Wriford would have nursed her and wept for her. Mr. Wriford nurses her very devotedly, as she says, but in long hours grugged from his work, as he knows. And has no tears. What, are even tears buried with Young Wriford? Mr. Wriford believes they are and hates himself anew and thousandfold that he has no sympathy, and often in remorse rushes home from the nightly fight with the *Intelligence* to go to Alice's bedside and make amends — not for active neglects, for there have been none — but for the secret dryness of his heart while he is with her and his thoughts are with his work. These are stirrings of Young Wriford, but of what avail stirrings within the tomb?

Alice dies. Here is Mr. Wriford by her death caught anew and caught worse in the meshes that entangle him. Remorse oppresses him at every thought of neglect of her and unkindness to her through these years. It can only be assuaged by new devotion to her boys and to her parents, much changed and stricken by her loss. He might leave this household now. He feels it is his duty to remain in it. They want him.

The thing goes on — swifter, fiercer, dizzier, and more dizzily yet. No one notices it. He's young, that's all they notice, not yet thirty, very youthful in the face, one of the lucky ones: that's all they notice. It goes on. He hides it, has to hide it. Can't bear that any of its baser manifestations — nerves, nervousness, shrinking — should be noticed. This is the stage of shunning people — of avoiding people's eyes that look, not at him, but into him and laugh at him. It goes on. He surprises himself by the work he does — always believes that this which has brought him merit, that which has named him one of the lucky ones anew, never can be equalled again; yet somehow is equalled; yet ever, as looking back he believes, at cost of greater effort, with touch less sure. This is the stage of beginning to expect that one day there will be an end, an explosion, all the fabric of his life and his success cant on its rotten foundations and come crashing.

Now the years run. The *Intelligence* people conceive *The Week Reviewed*: Mr. Wriford forms it, executes it, launches it, carries it to success, and the more energy he devotes to it the less has to resist the crumbling of his foundations. One of the lucky ones — one that has reached the stage of conscious effort to perform a task, drives himself through it, finishes it trembling, and only

wants to get away from everybody to hide how he trembles, and only wants to get to bed where it is dark and quiet, and only lies there turning from tangle to tangle of his preoccupations, counting the hours that refuse him sleep, crying to himself as he has been heard to cry: "Oh, I say, I say, I say! This can't go on! This must end! This must end!"

Thus, thus with Mr. Wriford, and worse and worse, and worse and worse. Thus through the years and thus arrived where first we found him. Behold him now, ten years from when Young Wriford, just twenty, met Alice and the children at Liverpool and ardently and eagerly and fearlessly planned his tremendous plans. That boy is dead. Return to him, little over thirty, everywhere successful, one of the lucky ones, that is come out of the grave where Young Wriford lies. Worse and worse! There is nothing he touches but brings him success; there is no one he meets or who speaks of him but envies him; and successful, lucky, it is only by throwing himself desperately into his work that he can forget the intolerable misery that presses upon him, the desire to wave his arms and scream aloud: "You call me lucky! Oh, my God! Oh, can't anybody see I'm going out of my mind with all this? Oh, isn't there anybody who can understand me and help me? Oh, I say, I say, I say, this can't go on. This must stop. This must end."

X

You see, he can't get out of it. In these years ! unceasing work, his harassing work, his fears of breaking down and bringing all who are dependent u

him to misery, and all his distresses of mind between the one and the other — all this has killed outlets by which now he might escape from it and has chained him hand and foot and heart and mind in the midst of it. His nephews leave him one by one to go out into the world, successfully equipped and started by his efforts. He is always promising himself, as first Harold goes, and then Fred and then Dick, who has chosen for the Army and enters Sandhurst, that now he will be able to change his mode of life and seek the rest and peace he craves for. He never does. He never can.

He never can. There is always a point in his work on his paper or with his books first to be reached: and when it is reached, there is always another. Now, surely, with Dick soon going out to India, he might leave the Filmers. They are comfortably circumstanced on their own means; the house is his and costs them nothing. Surely now, he tells himself, he might break away and leave them: but he cries to himself that for this reason and for that he cannot — yet: and he cries to himself that if he could, he knows not how he could. Everything in life that might have attracted him is buried ten years' deep in Young Wriford's grave. Brida could rescue him, he believes, and he tries Brida on that afternoon which has been seen: ah, like all the rest, she laughs at him — one of the lucky ones!

He is chained to himself, to that poor, shrinking, hideous devil of a Mr. Wriford that he has been made: and this is the period of furious hatred of that self, of burying himself in his work to avoid it, of sitting and staring before him and imagining he sees it, of threatening it aloud with cries of: "Curse you! Curse you!" of scheming to lay violent hands upon it.

CHAPTER III

FIGURE OF WRIFORD

I

THERE comes that day when Mr. Wriford went to Brida in desperate search of some one who should understand him and give him peace. It is a week after Dick has been shipped to join his regiment in India, and after a week alone with the Filmers, and of knowing not, even now that his responsibilities are finally ended, how to get out of it all — yet. It was his press-night with *The Week Reviewed*, as he had told Brida, and Mr. Wriford, with two articles to write, called upon himself for the effort to write them and to get his paper away by midnight — the weekly effort to “pull through” — and somehow made it.

Press-nights nowadays were one long, desperate grip upon himself to keep himself going until, far distant in the night and through a hundred stresses of his brain, the goal of “pulled through” should be reached. A hundred stresses! He always told himself, as the contingencies of the night heaped before him, that this time he would shirk this one, delegate that one to a subordinate. He never did. Fleet Street said of *The Week Reviewed* — a new thing in journalism — that Mr. Wriford was “IT.” Unique among politico-literary weeklies in that it went to press in one piece in one day,

and thus from first page to last presented a balance of contents based upon the affairs of the immediate moment, unique in that it was illustrated, in that it had at its command all the resources of the *Intelligence*, in that its price was two-pence — unique in all this, it was said by those who knew that *The Week Reviewed's* very great success was more directly due to the fact that it was saturated and polished in every article, every headline, every caption, by Mr. Wriford's touch. He would never admit how much of it he actually wrote himself; it only was known to all who had a hand in the making of it that nothing of which they had knowledge went into the paper precisely in the form in which it first came beneath Mr. Wriford's consideration. Sometimes, in the case of articles written by outside contributors of standing, members of his staff would remonstrate with him in some apprehension at this mangling of a well-known writer's work.

"Well, what does it matter whom he is?" Mr. Wriford would cry. "I don't mind people thinking things in the paper are rotten, if I've passed them and thought them good. But I'm damned if I let things go in that I know are rotten, just because they're written by some big man. I don't mind my own judgment being blamed. But I'm not going to hear criticism of anything in my paper and know that I made the same criticism myself but let it go. Satisfy yourself! That's the only rule to go by."

Therefore on this press-night as on every press-night — but somehow with worse effect this night than any — behold Mr. Wriford *satisfying himself*, and in the process whirling along towards the state that finds him sick and dizzy and trembling when at last the paper has

gone to press and once more he has pulled through. Behold him shrinking lower in his chair as the night proceeds, smoking cigarettes in the way of six or seven puffs at each, then giddiness, and then hurling it from him with an exclamation, and then the craving for another if another line is to be written, and then the same process again; stopping in his work in the midst of a sentence, in the midst of a word, to examine a page sent down from the composing-room; twisting himself over it to *satisfy himself* with it; rushing up-stairs with it to where, amid heat and atmosphere that are vile and intolerable to him, the linotype machines are rattling with din that is maddening to him, to *satisfy himself* that the page has not been rushed to the foundry without his emendations; there, a hundred times, sharp argument that is infuriating to him with head-printer and machine-manager who battle with time and are always behind time because advertisements and blocks are late, and now, as they say, he must needs come and pull a page to pieces; down to his room again, and more and worse interruptions that a thousand times he tells himself he is a fool not to leave in other hands and yet will attend to to *satisfy himself*; time wasted with superior members of his staff who come to write the final leaders on the last of the night's news and who are affected by no thought of need for haste but must wait and gossip till this comes from Reuter's or that from *The Intelligence's* own correspondent; time wasted over the line they think should be taken and the line to which Mr. Wriford, to *satisfy himself*, must induce them. Sometimes, thus occupied with one of these men, Mr. Wriford — a part of his mind striving to concentrate on the article he was himself in the midst of writing, part concentrating on

the page that lay before him waiting to be examined, part on the jump in expectation of a frantic printer's boy rushing in for the page at any moment, and the whole striving to force itself from these distractions and fix on the subject under discussion — sometimes in these tumults Mr. Wriford would have the impulse to let the man go and write what he would and be damned to him, or the page go as it stood and be damned to it, or his own article be cancelled and something — anything to fill — take its place. But that would not be *satisfying himself*, and that would be present relief at the cost of future dissatisfaction, and somehow Mr. Wriford would make the necessary separate efforts — somehow pull through.

II

Somehow pull through! In the midst of the worst nights, Mr. Wriford would strive to steady himself by looking at the clock and assuring himself that in three hours — two hours — one hour — by some miracle the tangle would straighten itself, and he would have pulled through and the paper be gone to press, as he had pulled through and the paper been got away before. So it would be to-night — but to-night! "If I dropped dead," said Mr. Wriford to himself, standing in his room on return from a rush up-stairs to the composing-room, and striving to remember in which of his tasks he had been interrupted, "if I dropped dead here where I am and left it all unfinished, we should get to press just the same somehow. Well, let me, for God's sake, fix on that and go leisurely and steadily as if it didn't matter. I shall go mad else; I shall go mad." But in a moment

he was caught up in the storm again and *satisfying himself* — and somehow pulling through. At shortly before midnight he was rushing up-stairs with the last page of his own article, and remaining then in the composing-room that sickened him and dazed him, himself to make up the last two forms — correcting proofs on wet paper that would not show the corrections and maddened him; turning aside to cut down articles to fit columns; turning aside to scribble new titles or to shout them to the compositors who stood waiting to set them; turning aside to use tact with the publisher's assistant who was up in distraction to know what time they were ever likely to get the machines going; turning aside to send a messenger to ask if that last block was ever coming; calculating all the time against the clock to the last fraction of a second how much longer he could delay — forever turning aside, forever calculating; deciding at last that the late block must not be waited for; peering in the galley racks to decide what should fill the space that had been left for it; selecting an article and cutting it to fit; at highest effort of concentration scanning the pages that at last were in proof — then to the printer: "All right; let her go!" Pulled through! And the heavy mallets flattening down the type no more than echoes of the smashing pulses in his brain. . . .

Pulled through! dizzily down-stairs. Pulled through and too sick, too spent, too nerveless, to exchar words with those of his staff who had been up-st with him and were come down, thanking heaven it over. Pulled through! and too spent, too finished clear up the litter of his room as he had intended capable only of dropping into his chair and then, ising his state, of calling upon himself in actual

pers: "Wriford! Wriford! Wriford!" but no responding energy.

III

He began to think of going home and began to think of the task of taking down his coat from behind the door and of the task of getting into it. He began to think of the paper that had just gone to press and began in his mind to go slowly through it from the first page, enumerating the title of each article and of each picture. Somewhere after half-a-dozen pages he would lose the thread and find himself miles away, occupied with some other matter; then he would start again.

It was towards one o'clock when he realised that if he did not move, he would miss a good train at Waterloo and have a long wait before the next. He decided against the effort of taking down and getting into his coat. He took up his hat and stick and left the building by the trade entrance at the back, meeting no one. He followed his usual habit of walking to Waterloo along the Embankment, and it was nothing new to him — for a press-night — that occasionally he found he could not keep a straight course on the pavement. Too many cigarettes, he thought. He crossed to the river side, and when he was a little way from Waterloo Bridge, a more violent swerve of his unsteady legs scraped him roughly against the wall. He had no control then, even over his limbs! and at that realisation he stopped and laid his hands on the wall and looked across the river and cried to himself that frequent cry of these days: "Wriford! Wriford! Wriford!"

The wall was rough to his hands, and that produced

the thought of how soft his hands were — how contemptibly soft he was all over and all through. “Wriford! Wriford! Wriford!” cried Mr. Wriford to himself and had a great surge through all his pulses that seemed — as frequently in these days but now more violently, more completely than ever before — to wash him asunder from himself, so that he was two persons: one within his body that was the Wriford he knew and hated, the other that was himself, his own, real self, and that cried to his vile, his hateful body: “Wriford! Wriford! Wriford!”

Intolerable — past enduring! Mr. Wriford jumped upwards, suspending his weight on his arms on the wall, and by the action was dispossessed of other thought than sudden recollection of exercises on the horizontal bar at school; seemed to be in the gymnasium, and saw the faces of forgotten school-fellows who were in his gym set waiting their turn. Then the Embankment again and realisation. Should he drop back to the pavement? “Wriford! Wriford! Wriford!” . He mastered that vile, damned, craven body and threw up his right leg and scrambled and pitched himself forward was conscious of striking his thigh violently against the wall, and at the pain and as he fell, thought: “H that’s one for you, damn you! I’ve got you this time — Got you!” And then was in the river, and then instinctively swimming, and then “Drown, damn you! Drown!” cried Mr. Wriford and stopped the action with his arms, and went down swallowing and struggling and came up struggling and choking, and instinctively struck out again.

Shouts and running feet on the Embankment
“Drown, damn you! Drown, drown!” cried Mr.

ford; went down again, came up facing the wall, and in the lamplight and in the tumult of his senses, saw quite clearly a bedraggled-looking individual peering down at him and quite clearly heard him call: "Nah, then. Nah, then. Wot yer up to dahn there?"

Shouts and running feet on the police pier not thirty yards away; sounds of feet in a boat; and then to Mr. Wriford's whirling, smashing intelligence, the sight of a boat — and what that meant.

Mr. Wriford thrust his hands that he could not stop from swimming into the tops of his trousers and twisted his wrists about his braces. "Drown, damn you! Drown!" cried Mr. Wriford, and the whirling, smashing scenes and noises lost coherence and only whirled and smashed, and then a hand was clutching him, and coherence returned, and Mr. Wriford screamed: "Let me go! Let me go!" and freed an arm from the entanglement of his braces and dashed it into the face bending over him and with his fist struck the face hard.

"Shove him under," said the man at the oars. "Shove him under. He'll 'ave us over else. . . ."

Mr. Wriford was lying in the boat. "Let me go," cried Mr. Wriford. "Let me go. You're hurting me."

"You've hurt me, you pleader," said the man, but relaxed the knuckles that were digging into Mr. Wriford's neck.

Mr. Wriford moaned: "Well, why couldn't you let me drown? Why, in God's name, couldn't you let me drown?"

"Not arf grateful, you beggars ain't," said the man; and presently Mr. Wriford found himself pulled up from the bottom of the boat and handed out on to the police

landing-stage to a constable with: "'Old 'im fast, Three-Four-One. Suicide, he is. 'Old 'im fast."

Three-Four-One responded with heavy hand . . . conversation. . . . Mr. Wriford standing dripping, sick, cold, beyond thought, presently walking across the Embankment and up a street leading to the Strand in Three-Four-One's strong grasp.

"Where are you taking me?" said Mr. Wriford.

"Bow Street," said Three-Four-One.

"Let me go!" sobbed Mr. Wriford.

"Not arf," said Three-Four-One.

Then a police whistle, shouts, running feet. Round the corner two men racing at top speed into Mr. Wriford and Three-Four-One, and Mr. Wriford and Three-Four-One sent spinning. All to earth, and the two runners atop, and a pursuing constable, unable to stop, upon the four of them. Blows, oaths, struggles.

Mr. Wriford rolled free of the pack and got to his feet, viewed a moment the struggle in progress before him, then turned down the side-street whence the pursuit had come, and ran; doubled up to the Strand and across the Strand and ran and ran and ran; glanced over his shoulder and saw one running, not after him, but with him — wet as himself and very like himself — "What do you want?" gasped Mr. Wriford. The figure made no reply but steadily ran with Mr. Wriford, and Mr. Wriford recognised him and stopped. "You Wriford, aren't you?" cried Mr. Wriford, and in sudden paroxysm screamed: "Why didn't you drown? Why didn't you drown when I tried to drown you, did you?" and in paroxysm of hate struck the man across his face. He felt his own face struck but felt hurt more than when he had bruised his thigh in le

from the Embankment wall. "Come on, then!" cried Mr. Wriford. "Come on, then, if you can! I'll make you sorry for it, Wriford. Come on, then!"

And Mr. Wriford turned again, and with the figure steadily beside him, ran and ran and ran and ran and ran.

CHAPTER IV

ONE RUNS: ONE FOLLOWS

I

MOST dreadful pains of distressed breathing, of
ing heart and of throbbing head, afflicted Mr. V
as he ran. He laboured on despite them. He
too, that he had started running to escape arr
had run on — across the Strand, up Kingsway, t
Russell Square, across the Euston road and stil
in terror of pursuit. All that possessed him ne
fear and hatred of the one that ran steadily at his
whom constantly he looked at across his shoul
then would try to run faster, whom presently he
halting in his run and at first unable to speak
agonies of his exertions.

Then Mr. Wriford said gaspingly: "Look
you're not to follow me. Do you understand?
then cried, with sobbing breaths: "Go awa
away, I tell you!"

In the rays that came from an electric-light st
near which they stood, Figure of Wriford seeme
to grin in mock of these commands.

Mr. Wriford waited to recover more regular
ing. Then he said fiercely: "Look here! Look
the road. There's a policeman there watchi
D'you see him? Well, are you going to leave
am I going to give you in charge? Now, then!"

Figure of Wriford only looked mockingly at him; and first there came to Mr. Wriford a raging impulse to strike him again, and then the knowledge that the policeman was watching; and then Mr. Wriford stepped swiftly across the road to carry out his threat; and then, as he approached the policeman, had a sudden realisation of the spectacle he must present — clothes dripping, hat gone, collar ripped away — and for fear of creating a scene, changed his intention. But his first impulse had brought him right up to the policeman. He must say something. He knew he was in the direction of Camden Town. He said nervously, trying to control his laboured breathing: "Can you tell us the way to Camden Town, please?"

II

This chanced to be a constable much used to the oddities of London life and, by many years of senior officer bullying and magisterial correction, cautious of interference with the public unless supported by direct Act of Parliament. He awaited with complete unconcern the bedraggled figure whose antics he had watched across the road, and in reply to Mr. Wriford's hesitating: "We want to get to Camden Town. Can you tell us the way, please," remarked over Mr. Wriford's head and without bending his own: "Well, you've got what you want. It's all round you," and added, indulging the humour for which he had some reputation: "That's a bit of it you're holding down with your feet."

Mr. Wriford looked at Figure of Wriford standing by his side. He looked so long with hating eyes, and was so long occupied with the struggle to brave fear of a

scene and give the man in charge for following him, that he felt some further explanation was due to the policeman before he could move away.

"Thanks," said Mr. Wriford. "Thank you, we rather thought we'd lost our way."

The policeman unbent a little and exercised his humour afresh. "Well, we've found it right enough," said he. "What are us, by any chance? King of Proosia or Imperial Hemperor of Wot O She Bumps?"

The constable's facetiousness was of a part with those slights to his dignity from inferiors which always caused Mr. Wriford insufferable humiliation. It angered him and gave him courage. "Take that man in charge," cried Mr. Wriford sharply. "He's following me. I'm afraid of him. Take him in charge."

"What man?" said the constable. "Don't talk so stupid. There's no man there."

"That man," cried Mr. Wriford. "Are you drur or what? Where's your Inspector?"

The constable, roused by this behaviour: "My Inspector's where you'll be pretty sharp, if I have much more of it — at the station! Now, then! Coming me with your us-es and your we-es! 'Op off out of d'ye see? 'Op it an' quick."

Mr. Wriford stared at him uncomprehendingly a moment and then screamed out: "I tell you man's following me. What's he following me for? followed me miles. I'm afraid of him. Send him. Send him away."

The constable tucked his gloves in his belt and caught Mr. Wriford strongly by the shoulder. "Now, here," said the constable, "there's no man there."

if you go on with your nonsense, you're Found Wandering whilst of Unsound Mind, that's what you are. You're asking for it, that's what you're doing, and in less than a minute you'll get it, if you ain't careful. Why don't you behave sensible? What's the matter with you? Now, then, are you going to 'op it quiet, or am I going to take you along? "

All manner of confusing ideas whirled in Mr. Wriford's brain while the constable thus addressed him. How, if he went to the Police Station, was he going to explain who this man was that was following him? The man was himself — that hated Wriford. Then who was he? Very bewildering. Very difficult to explain. Best get out of this and somehow give the man the slip. He addressed the constable quietly and with a catch at his breath: "All right. It's all right. Never mind."

The constable released him. "Now do you know where you live? "

"Yes, I know; oh, I know," Mr. Wriford said.

"Got some one to look after you, waiting up for you? "

"Yes — yes."

"Goin' to 'op it quiet? "

"Yes — yes. It's all right."

"Not goin' to give nobody in charge? "

Mr. Wriford stood away and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He said miserably: "No, it's all right. Only a bit of a quarrel. It's nothing. We'll go on. We're all right."

"Well, let me see you 'op it," said the policeman.

"All right," said Mr. Wriford. "All right," and he walked on, still just catching his breath a little, and

puzzling, and watching out of the corner of his Figure of Wriford who came on beside him.

III

He walked on through Camden Town and through Kentish Town, Figure of Wriford at his elbow. Sometimes he would glance at Figure of Wriford and would begin to run. Figure of Wriford ran with him. Sometimes he would stop and stand still. Figure of Wriford also stopped, halting a little behind him. As he looked back at Figure of Wriford, he saw a newspaper cart overtaking them, piled high with newspapers, driving fast. Mr. Wriford stepped off the pavement and began to cross the road. He judged exactly the distance at which Figure of Wriford followed him. When Figure of Wriford was right in the cart's way, and he a pace or two beyond it, he suddenly turned back and rushed for the pavement again.

"Now you're done for!" he shouted in Figure of Wriford's face; but it was himself that the shaft struck a glancing blow, staggering him to the path as the horse was wrenched aside; and he was dizzied and scared, heard the shouts of abuse cursed at him by the driver as the cart went on and he was left groaning at the violent hurt and shock he had suffered, Figure of Wriford beside him.

IV

Mr. Wriford walked on and on, planning his escape as he walked, and presently thought of one. He was by now at Highgate Archway, and follow-

the way he had pursued, came upon the road that runs through Finchley to Barnet and so in a great highway to the country beyond. Now early morning and early morning's solitude had given place to the warmth and opening activities of five o'clock — labourers passed to their work, occasional tram-cars, scraping on their overhead wires, came from Barnet or ran towards it. Mr. Wriford was glad of the sun. His running until he met the policeman had overcome the chill of his immersion in the river. Since then, he had felt his soaked clothing clinging about him, and his teeth chattered and he shivered, very cold. His exertions had run the water off him. Now the strong sun began to dry him. Gradually, as he went on, the shivering ceased to mingle with his breathing and only came to shake him in spasmodic convulsions, very violent. But his breathing remained in catching sobs, and that was because of his fear and hate of the one that trod at his elbow, and of effort and resolution on the plan that should escape him.

He began, as he approached the signs that indicated halting-stations for the tram-cars, to hurry past them, and when he was beyond a post, to dally and look behind him for an overtaking car. Several he allowed to pass. They were travelling too slowly for his purpose, and Figure of Wriford was watching him very closely. He came presently to a point where the road began to descend gently in a long and straight decline.

Here cars passed very swiftly, and as one came speeding while he was between halting-stations, Mr. Wriford bound up his purpose and launched it. The car whizzed up to them; Mr. Wriford, looking unconcernedly ahead, let it almost pass him, then he struck a savage blow at

Figure of Wriford and made a sudden and a wild dash to scramble aboard. The pole on the conductor's platform was torn through his hands that clutched at it; he grasped desperately at the back rail, stumbled, dragged, clung on, got a foot on the step, almost grabbed at the pole, drew himself aboard, and threw himself against the conductor who had rushed down from the top and, with one hand clutched at Mr. Wriford, with the other was about to ring the bell.

Mr. Wriford's onset threw him violently against the door, and Mr. Wriford, collapsed against him, cried "Don't ring! Don't stop!" and then turned and what he saw, screamed: "Don't let that man get on! Don't let him! Throw him off! Throw him off! I'll throw you, throw him —" But the conductor, very anxious, shaken in the nerves and bruised against the door, hustled Mr. Wriford within the car, and Mr. Wriford saw Figure of Wriford following on the heels of the scuffle; collapsed upon a seat and saw Figure of Wriford take a place opposite him; began to moan softly to himself and could not pay any attention to the conductor's abuse.

"Serve you right," said the conductor very heartily, "if you'd broke your neck. Jumpin' on my car that. Serve you to rights if you'd broke your neck. Nice thing for me if you had, I reckon. I reckon your sort what gets us poor chaps into trouble. I'll hold on to an overhead strap, swayed indignant at Mr. Wriford, and obtaining no satisfaction from sitting there very dejectedly, twisting his body together, little moans escaping him, tears standing in his eyes — directed his remarks towards the stout passenger in the car, who was a very stout

and who, responding with a refrain of: "Ah. That's right," induced the conductor to reiterate his charge in order to earn a full measure of the comfort which "Ah. That's right" evidently gave him.

"Serve you right if you'd broke your neck," declared the conductor.

"Ah. That's right," agreed the stout workman.

"Your sort what gets us chaps into trouble, I reckon."

"Ah. That's right," the stout workman affirmed.

"Nice thing for me an' my mate," declared the conductor, "to go before the Coroner. Lose a day's work and not 'arf lucky if we get off with that."

"Ah. That's right," said the stout workman and spat on the floor and rubbed it in with a stout boot, and as if intellectually enlivened by this discharge, varied his agreement to: "That's right, that is. Ah."

"Serve you right —" began the conductor again, and Mr. Wriford, acted upon by his persistence, said wearily: "Well, never mind. Never mind. I'm all right now."

"Well, I reckon you didn't ought to be," declared the conductor. "Not if I hadn't come down them steps pretty sharp, you didn't ought."

The stout workman: "Ah. That's right."

Now the conductor suddenly produced his tickets and sharply demanded of Mr. Wriford: "Penny one? Reckon you ought to pay double, you ought."

Mr. Wriford as suddenly roused himself, looked across at Figure of Wriford seated opposite, and as sharply replied: "I'm not going to pay for him! I won't pay for him, mind you!"

The conductor followed the direction of Mr. Wriford's

eyes, looked thence towards the stout workman, and then turned upon Mr. Wriford with: "Pay for yourself. That's what you've got to do."

"Ah. That's right," agreed the workman.

Mr. Wriford, breathing very hard, paid a penny, and receiving his ticket, watched the conductor very feverishly while he said: "Takes you to Barnet," and while at last he turned away and stood against the entrance. Then Mr. Wriford pointed to where Figure of Wriford sat and cried: "Where's that man's ticket?"

The conductor looked at the stout workman and tapped himself twice upon the forehead.

"Ah. That's right," said the stout workman; and thus supported, the conductor, no less a humourist than the policeman of an hour before, informed Mr. Wriford, with a wink at the stout workman: "He don't want no ticket."

Mr. Wriford appealed miserably: "Oh, why not? Why not?"

"He rides free," said the conductor. "That's what he does," and while the stout workman agreed to that with his usual formula, Mr. Wriford rocked himself and fro in his corner and said: "Oh, why did you let him on? Why did you let him on? I asked you not Oh, I asked you."

This caused much amusement to the conductor and the stout workman, and at Barnet the conductor successfully launched two shafts of wit which he elaborated with much care. As Mr. Wriford alighted "Wait for your friend," the conductor said, and as Wriford paused with twisting face and then set off the road, turned for the stout workman's attention and discharged his second brand. "Reck-

ought to ha' bin on a 'Anwell¹ car," said the conductor.

"Ah. That's right," said the stout workman.

V

Mr. Wriford passed through Barnet and walked on to the open country beyond, and still on and on throughout the day. He halted neither for rest nor refreshment. Night came, and still he walked. He had no thought of sleep, but sleep stole upon his limbs. He stumbled on a grassy roadside, fell, did not rise again, and slept. The hours marched and brought him to new day. He awoke, looked at Figure of Wriford who sat wide-eyed beside him, said "Oh — oh!" and walking all day long, said no other word.

Dusk of the second evening stole across the fields and massed ahead of him. Mr. Wriford's progression was now no more than a laboured dragging of one foot and a slow placing it before the other. He came at this gait over the brow of a hill, and it revealed to him one at whose arresting appearance and at whose greeting Mr. Wriford for the first time stopped of his own will and stood and stared, swaying upon his feet.

¹ Hanwell is the great lunatic asylum of London.

CHAPTER V

ONE IS MET

THIS was a somewhat tattered gentleman, ve seated comfortably against the hedge, long legs st before him, one terminating in a brown boot c shape, the other in a black, through which a t truded. This gentleman was shaped from the upwards like a pear, in that his girth was consic his shoulders very narrow, and his head and fac little round ball. He ate, as he reclined there, large piece of bread in one hand and a portion sausage in the other; and he appeared to be n incommoded as he did so, and as Mr. Wriford v him, by a distressing affliction of the hiccoughs as they rent him, he pronounced *hup!*

"*Hup!*" said this gentleman with his mouth fu then again "*hup!*" He then cleared his mouth, garding Mr. Wriford with a jolly smile, uprais sausage in greeting and trolled forth in a very dee and in the familiar chant:

" 'O all ye tired strangers of the Lord, bless Lord: praise Him and magnify Him for ever' -

"But you can't do that," continued the pear-gentleman, "when the famine has you in the vit the soreness in the legs, as it has you, unless you've tised it as much as I have. Then it is both fo rest. In this wise —

"*Hup!* — O all ye hungry of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and *hup*-nify Him for ever.

"Hunger, I assure you," said the pear-shaped gentleman, "flee-eth before that shout as the wild goat before the hunter. Hunger or any ill. I have known every ill and defeated them all. Selah!"

There was about this unusual gentleman that which doubly attracted Mr. Wriford. The Mr. Wriford of a very few days ago, who avoided eyes, who shrank from strangers, would hurriedly and self-consciously have passed him by. The Mr. Wriford with whom Figure of Wriford walked was attracted by the pear-shaped gentleman's careless happiness and attracted much more by his last words. He came a slow step nearer the pear-shaped gentleman, looked at Figure of Wriford, and from him with eyes that signalled secrecy to the pear-shaped gentleman, and in a low voice demanded: "You have known every ill? Have you ever been followed?"

The pear-shaped gentleman stared curiously at Mr. Wriford for a moment. Then he said: "Not so much followed, which implies interest or curiosity, as *chased* — which betokens vengeance or heat. With me that is a common lot. By dogs often and frequently bitten of them. By farmers a score time and twice assaulted. By —"

"Have you ever been followed by yourself?" Mr. Wriford interrupted him.

The pear-shaped gentleman inclined his head to one side and examined Mr. Wriford more curiously than before. "Have you come far?" he inquired.

"From Barnet," said Mr. Wriford.

"Spare us!" said the pear-shaped gentleman with much piety. "Long on the road?"

Mr. Wriford looked at Figure of Wriford, and for the first time since the event on the Embankment cast his mind back along their companionship. It seemed immensely long ago; and at the thought of it, there overcame Mr. Wriford a full and a sudden sense of his misery that somehow unmanned him the more by virtue of this, the first sympathetic soul he had met since he had fled — since, as somehow it seemed to him, very long before his flight. He said, with a break in his voice and his voice very weak: "I don't know how long we've been. We've been a long time."

The pear-shaped gentleman inclined his head with a jerk to the opposite side and took a long gaze at Mr. Wriford from that position. He then said: "How many of you?"

Mr. Wriford, a little surprise in his tone: "Why just we two."

"*Hup!*" said the pear-shaped gentleman, said i with the violence of one caught unawares and considerably startled, and then, recovering himself, directed upon Mr. Wriford the same jolly smile with which he had first greeted him, and again upraising the sausage trolled forth very deeply:

"O all ye loonies of the Lord, bless ye the Lord praise Him and magnify Him for ever."

The pear-shaped gentleman then jumped to his with an agility very conspicuous in one of his girth, of considerable purpose, in that he had no sooner tained his balance on his feet than Mr. Wriford lost balance upon *his* feet, swayed towards the arms stretched to him, was assisted to the hedgeside, and then collapsed with a groan of very great fatigue.

The pear-shaped gentleman on his knees, busy

himself with a long bottle and a tin can taken from the grass, with a clasp knife, the cold sausage, and the portion of bread: "I will have that groan into a shout of praise before I am an hour nearer the grave or I am no man. Furthermore," continued the pear-shaped gentleman, filling the can very generously and assisting it very gently to Mr. Wriford's lips, "furthermore, I will have no man groan other than myself, who groaneth often and with full cause. Your groan and your countenance betokeneth much misery, and I will not be bested by any man either in misery or in any other thing. I will run you, jump you, wrestle you, drink you, eat you, whistle you, sing you, dance you — I will take you or any man at any challenge; and this I will do with you or any man for — win or lose — three fingers of whisky, the which, *hup!* is at once my curse and my sole delight. Selah!"

As he delivered himself of these remarkable sentiments, the pear-shaped gentleman cut from the sausage and the bread the portions to which his teeth had attended, conveyed these to his own mouth, which again became as full as when Mr. Wriford had first seen it, and pressed the remainders upon Mr. Wriford with a cordiality much aided by his jolly speech and by the tin can of whisky which now ran very warmly through Mr. Wriford's veins. These combinations, indeed, and the sight and then the taste of food awakened very ferociously in Mr. Wriford the hunger which had now for two days been gathering within him. He ate hungrily, and, in proportion as his faintness became satisfied, something of an irresponsible light-headedness came to him; he began to give little spurts of laughter at the whimsicality of the pear-shaped gentleman and for the

first time to forget the presence of Figure of Wriford; he accepted with no more reluctance than the same nervous humour a final absurdity which, as night closed about them, and as his meal was finished, the pear-shaped gentleman pressed upon him.

"I can hardly keep awake," said Mr. Wriford and lay back against the hedge.

The pear-shaped gentleman answered him from the darkness: "Well, this is where we sleep — a softer couch than any of your beds, and I have experienced every sort. The painful eructations which, to my great though lawful punishment, my proneness for the whisky puts upon me, are now, *hup!* almost abated, and I, too incline to slumber."

Mr. Wriford said sleepily: "You've been awfully kind."

"I have conceived a fancy for you," said the pear-shaped gentleman. "I like your face, boy. I call you boy because you are youthful, and I am older than you in sin, curse me, as old as any man. I also call you loony, which it appears to me you are, and for which like you none the worse. As an offset to the liberty you shall call me by any term you please."

Mr. Wriford scarcely heard him. "Well, I'd like know your name," said he.

"Puddlebox," said the pear-shaped gentleman; to Mr. Wriford's little spurt of sleepy laughter replied "A name that I claim to be all my own, for I will be beat at a name, nor at any thing, as I have told you by any man."

To this there was but a dreamy sigh from Mr. Wriford and Mr. Puddlebox inquired of him: "Sleepy?"

"Dog-tired," said Mr. Wriford.

"Happy?"

"I'm all right," said Mr. Wriford.

"Well, then, you are much better, loony," said Mr. Puddlebox. He then put out a hand in the darkness, and touching Mr. Wriford's ribs, obtained his fuller attention. "You are much better," repeated Mr. Puddlebox, "and if you will give me your interest for a last moment, we will continue in praise the cure which we have begun very satisfactorily in good whisky, cold sausage, and new bread. A nightly custom of mine which I suit according to the circumstances and in which, being suited to you, you shall now accompany me."

"Well?" said Mr. Wriford, aroused, and laughed again in light-hearted content. "Well?"

"Well," said Mr. Puddlebox, "thusly," and trolled forth very deeply into the darkness:

"O all ye loonies of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever."

"Now you," said Mr. Puddlebox.

Mr. Wriford protested with nervous laughter: "It's too ridiculous!"

"It's wonderfully comforting," said Mr. Puddlebox; and Mr. Wriford laughed again and in a voice that contrasted very thinly with the volume of Mr. Puddlebox's gave forth as requested:

"O all ye loonies of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever."

"Scarcely body enough," adjudged Mr. Puddlebox, "but that will come with appreciation of its value. Now one other, and this time touching that friend of yours whom I name Spook. We have starved him to his great undoing, for you have fed while he has hungered, and his bowels are already weakened upon you. We will

now further discomfort him with praise. This time together — O all ye Spooks. Now, then."

"It's absurd," said Mr. Wriford. "It's too ridiculous"; but in the midst of his laughter at it had a sudden return to Figure of Wriford who was the subject of it and cried out: "Oh, what shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?"

"Why, there you go!" cried Mr. Puddlebox. "There's the necessity of it. Fight against him, boy. Let him not beat you, nor any such. Quick now — O all ye —"

And Mr. Wriford groaned, then laughed in a nervous little spurt, then groaned again, then weakly quavered while Mr. Puddlebox strongly belled:

"O all ye spooks of the Lord, bless ye the Lord praise Him and magnify Him for ever."

"Feel better?" questioned Mr. Puddlebox.

In the darkness only some stifled sounds answered him.

"Crying, loony?"

Only those sounds.

Mr. Puddlebox put out a large hand, felt for Mr. Wriford's hands and clasped it upon them. "Hold my hand, boy."

Sleep came to them.

CHAPTER VI

FIGHTING IT: TELLING IT

THIS was a large, fat, kindly and protective hand in whose comfort Mr. Wriford slept, beneath which he awoke, and whose aid he was often to enjoy in immediate days to come. Yet its influence over him was by no means always apparent. Increasing acquaintance with Mr. Puddlebox was needed for its development, and this had illustration in the manner of his first sleep by Mr. Puddlebox's side.

Thus at first Mr. Wriford, clutching like a child at the hand which came to him in the darkness, and no little operated upon by intense fatigue, by the whisky, and by the meal of cold sausage and bread, slept for some hours very soundly and without dreams. Next his state became troubled. His mind grew active while yet his body slept. Very disturbing visions were presented to him, and beneath them he often moaned. They rode him hard, and ridden by them he began to find his unaccustomed couch first comfortless and then distressing. A continuous, tremendous, and rasping sound began to mingle with and to be employed by his visions. He sat up suddenly, threw off Mr. Puddlebox's hand in bewildered fear of it, then saw that the enormous raspings proceeded from Mr. Puddlebox's nose and open mouth, and then remembered, and then saw Figure of Wriford seated before him.

Mr. Wriford caught terribly at his breath and with the action drew up his knees. He placed his elbows on them and covered his face with his hands. He pressed his fingers together, but through their very flesh he yet could see Figure of Wriford quite plainly, grinning at him. Hatred and fear gathered in Mr. Wriford amain. With them he drew up all the fibres of his body, drew his heels closer beneath him, prepared to spring fiercely at the intolerable presence, then suddenly threw his hands from him and at the other's throat, and cried aloud and sprung.

He struggled. He fought. Figure of Wriford was screaming at him, and in that din, and in the din of bursting blood within his brain, he heard Mr. Puddlebox also shouting at him strangely. "Glumph him, boy," Mr. Puddlebox shouted. "Glumph him, glumph him!" And there was Mr. Puddlebox hopping bulkily about him as he fought and struggled and staggered, and desperately sickened, and desperately strove to keep his feet.

"Help me!" choked Mr. Wriford. "Help me Help me! Kill him! Kill! Kill!"

"Kill yourself!" came Mr. Puddlebox's voice "You're killing yourself! You're killing yourself! What the devil? You're fighting yourself, boy. You fighting yourself. Loose him, boy! Loose him! You got him beat! Loose him now, loose him — *Ooop!*"

This bitter cry of "*Ooop!*" unheeded by Mr. Wriford was shot out of agony to Mr. Puddlebox's black-boo foot, upon the emerging toes of which Mr. Wriford heel came with grinding force. "*Ooop!*" bawled Mr. Puddlebox and hopped away upon the shapely brogue boot, the other foot clutched in his hands, and tumbled

"*Ooop!*" again — "*Ooop! Erp! Blink!*" For there crashed upon his nose a smashing fist of Mr. Wriford's arm, and down he went, blood streaming, and Mr. Wriford atop of him, and Mr. Wriford's head with stunning force against a telegraph pole, thence to an ugly stone.

Stillness then of movement; and of sounds only immense gurgling and snuffling from Mr. Puddlebox, lamentably engaged upon his battered nose.

Mr. Wriford sat up. He pressed a hand to his head and presently, his chest heaving, spoke with sobbing breaths. "You might have helped me," he sobbed. "You might have helped me."

From above his dripping nose, Mr. Puddlebox regarded him dolorously. He had no speech.

"You might have helped me," Mr. Wriford moaned.

"Glug," said Mr. Puddlebox thickly. "Glug. Blink!"

"When you saw me —" Mr. Wriford cried.

"Glug," said Mr. Puddlebox. "Blink! Helped you!" he then cried. "Why, look what the devil I have helped you! Glug. If I have bled a pint, I have bled a quart, and at this flood I shall ungallon myself to death. Glug. Blink. Why, I was no less than a fool ever to come near you. Might have helped you! Glug!"

Mr. Wriford's common politeness came to him. With some apology in his tone, "I don't know how you got that," he said. "I only —"

Mr. Puddlebox, very woefully from behind a blood-red cloth: "I don't know how I shall ever get over it." But he was by now a little better of it, the flow somewhat staunched, and he said with a vexation that he justified

by glances at the soaking cloth between dabs of it at his nose: "Why, I helped you in all I could. You fought like four devils. I was in the very heart of it. I —"

"I heard you," said Mr. Wriford, "shouting 'Glumph him!' or some such word. It was no help to —"

Mr. Puddlebox returned crossly. "Glumph him! Certainly I — glug. Blink! There it is off again. Glug. Certainly I shouted glumph him. A glumph is a fat hit — a hit without art or science, and the only sort of which I am capable, or you, either, as I saw at a glance. Glug."

"I was fighting," said Mr. Wriford. "I was being killed, and you —"

"Why, I was being killed also," returned Mr. Puddlebox. "Look at my foot. Look at my nose. Fighting Why, there never was such senseless fighting — never Glug. Blink! Why, beyond that you fought with me whenever I came near you, who to the devil do you think you were fighting with?"

Mr. Wriford looked at him with very troubled eyes. After a little while, "Why, tell me whom," he said. "I want to know." His voice ran up and he cried: "It's not right! I want to know."

"Why, loony," said Mr. Puddlebox kindly, suddenly losing his heat and his vexation, "why, loony, you were fighting yourself."

"Yes," Mr. Wriford answered him hopelessly. "I know. That's it. Myself that follows me," and he moaned and wrung his hands, rocking himself where he sat.

Mr. Puddlebox supported his nose with his blood-cloth and waddled to Mr. Wriford on his knees. He pressed himself on his heels and wagged a grave finger be-

Mr. Wriford's face. "Now look here, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox. "When I say you, I mean you — *that* you," and he dug the finger at Mr. Wriford's chest. "When I say fought yourself, I mean your own hands — *those* hands, at your own throat — *that* throat."

Mr. Puddlebox spoke so impressively, looking so strongly and yet so kindly at Mr. Wriford, that great wonder and trouble came into Mr. Wriford's eyes, and he put his fingers to his throat, that was red and scarred and tender, and said wonderingly, doubtfully, pitifully: "Do you mean that I did this to myself — with my own hands?"

"Why, certainly I do," returned Mr. Puddlebox, "and with your own hands this to my nose. Why, I awoke with a kick that you gave me, and there you were, dancing over there with sometimes your hands squeezing the life out of yourself, black in the face, and your eyes like to drop out, and sometimes your hands smashing at nothing except when they smashed me, and screaming at the top of your voice, and your feet staggering and plunging — why, you were like to have torn yourself to bits, but that you fell, and the pole here knocked sense into you. Like this you had yourself," and Mr. Puddlebox took his throat in his hands in illustration, "and shook yourself so," and shook his head violently and ended "Glug. Curse me. I've started it again. Glug," and mopped his nose anew.

Mr. Wriford said in horror, more to himself than aloud: "Why, that's madness!"

"Why — glug, blink!" said Mr. Puddlebox. "Why, that's what it will be if you let it run, boy. That's what will be, if you are by yourself, which you shall not be, for I like your face, and I will teach you to glumph it

out of you. This is a spook that you think you see, and that is why I call you loony, and it is no more a real thing than the several things I see when the whisky is in me, as I have taught myself — glug, I shall bleed to death — as I have taught myself to know, and as I shall teach you. Wherefore we are henceforward comrades, for you are not fit to take care of yourself till this thing is out of you. We shall now breakfast,” continued Mr. Puddlebox, beginning with one hand, the other kept very gingerly to his nose, to feel towards his bundle on the grass, “and you shall tell me who you are, and why you are spooked, first unspooking yourself, as last night, with praise. Come now, we will have them both together — O ye loonies and spooks — ”

“I won’t!” said Mr. Wriford. He sat with his hands to his chin, his knees drawn up, wrestling in a fevered mind with what facts came out of Mr. Puddlebox’s jargon. “I won’t!”

“It is very comforting,” said Mr. Puddlebox, not at all offended. “Try breakfast first, then.”

“Oh, let me alone,” cried Mr. Wriford. “I don’t want breakfast.”

“I do,” returned Mr. Puddlebox. “The more so that I have lost vast blood. There is enough whisk here to invigorate me, yet, under Providence, not plague me with the hiccoughs. Also good cold bac. Come, boy, cold bacon.”

“I don’t want it,” Mr. Wriford said.

“More for me,” said Mr. Puddlebox, “and I want much. While I eat, you shall tell me how you come to be loony, and I will then tell you how I come to be well I am. And I will tell a better story than you or than a man. Come now!”

An immense bite of the cold bacon then went to Mr. Puddlebox's mouth, and Mr. Wriford, looking up, found himself so jovially and affectionately beamed upon through the bite, that he suddenly turned towards Mr. Puddlebox and said: "I'll tell you. I'd like to tell you. You've been very kind to me. I've never said thank you. I'm ill. I don't know what I am."

Gratified sounds from Mr. Puddlebox's distended mouth — inarticulate for the cold bacon that impeded them, but sufficiently interpreted by quick nods of the funny little round head and by smiles.

"It's very strange to me," said Mr. Wriford in a low voice, "to be sitting here like this and talking to you. I don't know how I do it. A little while ago I was in London, and I couldn't have done it then. I never spoke to anybody that I could help — I remember that. I say I can remember that, because there are a lot of things I can't remember. I've been like that a long time. I've never told anybody before. I don't know how I tell you now — I said that just now, didn't I?" and Mr. Wriford stopped and looked at Mr. Puddlebox in a puzzled way.

Mr. Puddlebox, cheeks much distended, first shook his head very vigorously and then as vigorously nodded it. This thoughtfully left it to Mr. Wriford to choose whichever distressed him less, and he said: "In the middle of thinking of a thing it goes." There was a rather pitiful note in Mr. Wriford's voice, and he sat dejectedly in silence. When next he spoke, he shook himself, and as though the action shook off his former mood, he said excitedly, bending forward towards Mr. Puddlebox: "Look here, I've never done things! I've been shut up. I've had things to look after. I've never

been able to rest. I've never been able to be quiet. There's always been something else. There's always been something all round me, like walls — oh, like walls! Always getting closer. I've never been able to stop. No peace. There's always been some trouble — something to think about that grinds me up, and in the middle of it something else. There's always been something hunting me. Always something, and always something else waiting behind that. Like walls, closer and closer. I never could get away. I tell you, every one I ever met had something for me that kept me. I wanted to scream at them to let me alone. I never could get away. I was shut up. I'm a writer. I write newspapers and books. People know me — people who write. I hate them all. I've often looked at people and hated everybody. They look at me and see what I am and laugh at me. They know I'm frightened of them. I'm frightened because I've been shut up, and that's made me different from other people. I'm a writer. I've made much more money than I want. I've looked at people in trains and places and known I could have bought them all up ten times over. And the money's never been any use to me — not when you're shut up, not when there's always something else, not when you're always trembling. I never can make people understand. They don't know I'm shut up. They don't see that there's always something else. They think — ”

Mr. Wriford stopped and looked again in a puzzled way at Mr. Puddlebox and then said apologetical “ I don't know how I've come here. I don't understand it just at present. I'll think of it in a minute; ” and then broke out suddenly and very fiercely: “ But tell you, although you say it isn't, and God only knows

why you should interfere or what it's got to do with you, I tell you that I've had myself walking with me and want to kill it. And I will kill it! It's done things to me. It's kept me down. I hate it. It's been me for a long time. But it isn't me! I'm different. I can look back when you never knew me, and God knows how different I've been — young and happy! I want to die. If you want to know, though what the devil it's got to do with — I want to die, die, die! I want to get out of it all. Yes, now I remember. That's it. I want to get out of it all. Everything's all round me, close to me. I can scarcely breathe. I want to get out of it. I've been in it long enough. I want to smash it all up. Smash it with my hands to blazes. My name's Wriford. If you don't believe it, you can ask any one in London who knows about newspapers and books, and they'll tell you. I'm Wriford, and I want to get out of it all. I want to kill myself and get away alone. I won't have myself with me any longer! Damn him, he's a vile devil, and he isn't me at all. I'm Wriford! Good Lord, before I began all this, I used to be — He's a vile, cowardly devil. I want to get away from him and get away by myself. I want to smash it all up. With my hands I want to smash it and get away alone — alone; ” and then Mr. Wriford stopped with chest heaving and with burning eyes, and then tore open his coat and then his shirt, as though his body burned and he would have the air upon it.

All this time Mr. Puddlebox had been champing steadily with mouth prodigiously filled. Now he washed down last fragments of cold bacon with last dregs of good whisky and, with no sort of comment upon Mr. Wriford's story or condition, announced: “ Now I will

tell you my story. That's fair. Then we shall know each other as comrades should; which, as I have said, we are to be henceforward and until I have unspooked you. Furthermore, as I also said, I will tell a better story than you — yes, or than any man, for I will take you or any man at any thing and give best to none. Selah."

CHAPTER VII

HEARING IT

"My name is Puddlebox," said Mr. Puddlebox. He settled his back comfortably against the hedge and looked with a very bright eye at Mr. Wriford, who sat bowed before him and who at this beginning, and catching Mr. Puddlebox's merry look, shook himself impatiently and averted his eyes, that were pained and troubled, to the ground, as though he would hear nothing of it and wished to be wrapped in his own concerns.

Not at all discouraged, "My name is Puddlebox," Mr. Puddlebox continued. "I was born many highly virtuous years ago in the ancient town of Hitchin, which lies not far from us as we sit. My father was an ironmonger, of good business and held in high esteem by all who knew him. My mother was an ironer, and love, which, as I have marked, will make use of any bond, perhaps attracted these two by medium of the iron upon which each depended for livelihood. My mother sang in the choir of her chapel, and my father, who sometimes preached there, has told me that she presented a very holy and beautiful picture as the sun streamed through the window and fell upon her while she hymned. Here again," continued Mr. Puddlebox, "the ingenuity of love is to be observed, for this same sunlight, though it adorned my mother, also incommoded her, and my father, in his capacity as ironmonger, was called upon to

fit a blind for her greater convenience. This led to their acquaintance and, in process of lawful time, to me whom they named Eric. Little Eric. Five followed me. I was the eldest, and the most dutiful, of six. Offspring of God-fearing parents, I was brought up in the paths of diligence and rectitude — trained in the way I should go and from my earliest years pursued that way without giving my parents one single moment's heart-burning or doubt. I was, and I have ever been, a little ray of sunshine in their lives."

"You're a tramp, aren't you?" said Mr. Wriford.

On the previous evening Mr. Puddlebox had induced in Mr. Wriford a mood in which his griefs had disappeared before little spurts of involuntary laughter. The same, arising out of Mr. Puddlebox's whimsical narration of his grotesque story, threatened him now, and he resisted it. He resisted it as a vexed child, made to laugh despite himself, seeks by cross yet half-laughing rejoinders to preserve his ill-humour and not be wheedled out of it.

"You're a tramp, aren't you?" said Mr. Wriford but Mr. Puddlebox, with no notice of the interruption continued: "A little ray of sunshine. My dear parents in time sent me to school. Here, by my diligence and aptitude, I brought at once great shame upon my elder classmates and great pride to the little parlour behind the ironmonger's shop. It became furnished, the pleasant parlour, with my prize-books, and decorated with my medals and certificates of punctuality and good conduct. As I grew older, so the ray of sunshine which I effulged waxed brighter and warmer. My father, encouraged and advised by my teachers, offered me the choice of many lucrative and gentlemanly professions."

fessions. It was suggested that I should embrace a few of the many scholarships that were at the easy command of my abilities and my industry, proceed to the University, and become pedagogue, pastor, or lawyer. I well remember, and I remember it with pride and happiness, the grateful mingling of my parents' tears when I announced that I spurned these attractions, desiring only to be apprenticed to my dear father's business, perpetuate the grand old name of Puddlebox, ironmonger, Hitchin, and become the prop and comfort of the evening of my parents' years.

"This was the time," proceeded Mr. Puddlebox, "when, in common with all youth, I was subjected to the temptations of gross and idle companions. As I had shamed my classmates at school, so I shamed my would-be betrayers in the street. They called me to the pleasures of the public-house. I pointed to the blue-ribbon badge of my pledges against intoxicating liquors. They enticed me to ribaldry, to card-playing, to laughter with dangerous women. I openly rebuked them and besought them for their own good instead to sit with me of an evening, while I read aloud from devotional works to my dear parents. My spare time I devoted to my Sunday-school class, to the instruction of my younger brothers and sisters, and to profitable reading. My recreation took the form of adorning our chapel with the arts of turnery and joinery which I had learnt together with that of pure ironmongery."

All this was more and more punctuated with spurts of laughter from Mr. Wriford, and now, laughing openly, "Well, when did all this stop?" he said.

"It never stopped," returned Mr. Puddlebox. "A calamitous incident diverted it to another train; that

is all. Five sovereigns, nine shillings, and fourpence were one day found to be missing from the till. It was in the till when the shop was shut at seven o'clock one Saturday night, and it was out of the till when my father went to transfer it to the cash-box at eight o'clock. We kept no servant. No stranger had entered the house. The theft lay with one of my brothers and sisters. My father's passion was terrible to witness. That a child of his should rob his own father produced in him a paroxysm of wrath such as even I, well knowing his sternly religious nature, did not believe him capable of. With shaking voice he demanded of my brothers and sisters severally and collectively who had brought this shame upon him. All denied it. I was in an adjoining room — as horrified and as trembling as my father. I knew the culprit. I had seen a Puddlebox — a Puddlebox! — with his hand in his father's till. My long discipline in virtue and in filial and fraternal devotion told me at once what I must do. I must shield the culprit; I must take the blame upon myself."

"Why?" said Mr. Wriford.

"I did not hesitate a moment," said Mr. Puddlebox, disregarding the question. "Breathing a rapid prayer for my dear ones' protection and for the forgiveness of the culprit, I turned instantly and fled from the house. I have never seen my parents since. I have never again revisited the ancestral home of the Puddleboxes. I am I content and would not have it otherwise, for I am happy in the knowledge that I have saved the culprit. Since then, I have devoted my life over a wider area to the good works which formerly I practised within municipal boundaries of beloved Hitchin. I tour the countryside in a series of carefully planned amb

seeking, by ministration to the sick and needy, to shed light and happiness wherever I go, supporting myself by those habits of diligence and sobriety which became rooted in me in my childhood's years. You say your name is Wriford, and that you are of repute in London. My name is Puddlebox, and I am known, respected, and welcomed in a hundred villages, boroughs, and urban districts. Now that is my story," concluded Mr. Puddlebox, "and I challenge you to say that yours is a better."

Mr. Wriford was by this time completely won out of the fierce and tumultuous thoughts that had possessed him when Mr. Puddlebox began. His little spurts of involuntary laughter had become more frequent and more openly daring as Mr. Puddlebox proceeded, and now, quite given over to a nervously light-headed state such as may be produced in one by incessant tickling, he laughed outright and declared: "I don't believe a word of it!"

"Well," said Mr. Puddlebox, merrier than ever in the eye, and speaking with a curious note of triumph as though this were precisely what he had been aiming at, "Well, I don't believe a word of yours!"

"Mine's true," cried Mr. Wriford, quick and sharp, and got indignantly to his feet. Habit of thought of the kind that had helped work his destruction in him jumped at him at this, as he took it, flat insult to his face, and in the old way set him surging in head and heart at the slight to his dignity. "Mine's true!" he cried and looked down hotly at Mr. Puddlebox.

"And mine's as true," said Mr. Puddlebox equably and giving him only the same merry eye.

Mr. Wriford, heaving: "Why, you said yourself —

only last night — that whisky was your curse. You've told me a lot of rubbish; you couldn't have meant it for anything else. I've told you facts. What don't you believe?"

"I don't believe any of it," said Mr. Puddlebox, and at Mr. Wriford's start and choke, added quickly: "as you tell it."

One of those sudden blanks, one of those sudden snappings of the train of thought — *click!* like an actual snapping in the brain — came to Mr. Wriford. One of those floodings about his mind of immense and whirling darkness in which desperately his mental eye sought to peer, and desperately his mental hands to grope. He tried to remember what it was that he had told Mr. Puddlebox. He tried to search back among recent moments that he could remember — or thought he remembered — for words he must have spoken but could not recollect. His indignation at Mr. Puddlebox's refusal to believe him disappeared before this anguish and the trembling that it gave. He made an effort to hold his own, not to betray himself, and with it cried indignantly: "Well, what did I say?" then, unable to sustain it, abandoned himself to the misery and the helplessness, and used again the same words, but pitifully. "Well, what did I say?" Mr. Wriford asked and caught his breath in a sob.

Mr. Puddlebox put that large, soft, fat, kindly and protective hand against Mr. Wriford's leg that stood over him and pulled on the trouser. "Now, look here, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox very soothingly, "sit here by me, and I will tell you what you said, and we will put this to the rights of it."

Very dejectedly Mr. Wriford sat down; very p

tectively Mr. Puddlebox put the large hand on his knee and patted it. "Now, look here, my loony," said Mr. Puddlebox, "I'll tell you what you said, and what I mean by saying I don't believe a word of it as you tell it. What I mean, my loony, is that there's one thing the same in your story and in mine, and it is the same in every story that I hear from folks along the road, and I challenge you or any man to hear as many as I have heard. It is that we've both been glumphed, boy. We've both led beautiful, virtuous lives and ought to be angels with beautiful wings — 'stead of which, here we are: glumphed; folks have got up and given us fat hits and glumphed us.

"Well, there's two ways," continued Mr. Puddlebox with great good humour, "there's two ways of telling a glumphed story, my loony: the way of the glumphed, which I have told to you, and the way of the glumphers, which I now shall tell you. Take my story first, boy. Glumphed, which is me, tells you of a child and a boy and a youth which was the pride and the comfort and the support of his parents; glumphers, which is they, would tell you I was their shame and their despair. Glumphed: diligent, shaming his classmates, adorning the parlour with prize-books; glumphers: never learning but beneath the strap, idle, disobedient. Glumphed: spurning companions who would entice him; glumphers: leading companions astray. Glumphed: putting away nobler callings and desirous only to serve his father in the shop; glumphers: wasting his parents' savings that would educate him for the ministry, and of the shop sick and ashamed. Glumphed: reading devotional books to his mother; glumphers: breaking her heart. Glumphed: knowing the culprit who robbed his father

and everywhere known to the police. "There's a difference for you, boy," concluded Puddlebox; and he had recited it all so comically that he again brought Mr. Wriford out of dejection to the mood of little spurts of merriment. "Puffed," Mr. Puddlebox had said, and then he had represented that individual and spirit with a very high squeak; and then "glumph" he had uttered with his fat hand brought forward and his vocal bass. Now he turned his merry glance to Mr. Wriford: and Mr. Wriford met the glance and laughed aloud.

"See what you're driving at," Mr. Wriford said. "It doesn't apply to me, you know. Yes, I've — er — robbed tills, or — well, some kind of thing, do you?"

"I don't know what you've done," said Mr. Wriford. "But this I do know, that your story is a true story, and the same as everybody's story. That you've never done anything wrong, and that all your troubles are what other people — have done to you. Well —"

yourself until you've come to see yourself and to be followed by yourself. Well, you've got to get away from yourself. That's what you want, boy — you know that? ”

“ Yes, I'm followed,” Mr. Wriford cried. He clutched at Mr. Puddlebox's last words; and, at the understanding that seemed to be in them, forgot all else that had been said and cried entreatingly: “ I'm followed, followed! ”

“ I will shake him off,” said Mr. Puddlebox. “ You want to get away? ”

“ I must! ” said Mr. Wriford. “ I must! ”

“ And you don't mind what happens to you? ”

“ I don't mind anything.”

“ Why, then, cheer up,” cried Mr. Puddlebox with a sudden infectious burst of spirits, “ for I don't, either; and so there are two of us, and the world is full of fun for those who mind nothing. I will teach you to sing, and I will teach you to find in everything measure for my song, which is of praise and which is:

“ O ye world of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever.

“ Up, my loony, and I will teach you to forget yourself, which is what is the matter with you and with most of us.”

Mr. Puddlebox with these words got very nimbly to his feet, and there took Mr. Wriford a sudden infection of Mr. Puddlebox's spirits, which made him also jump up and stand with this jolly and pear-shaped figure who minded nothing, and look at him and laugh in irresponsible glee. Mr. Puddlebox wore a very long and very large tail-coat, in the pockets of which he now began to stuff his empty bottle, a spare boot, what appeared to

be a shirt in which other articles were rolled, and sundry other packets which he picked up from the grass about him. Upon his head he wore a hard felt hat whose rim was gone, so that it sat upon him like an inverted basin; and about his considerable waist he now proceeded to wind a great length of string. He presented, when his preparations were done, so completely odd and so jolly a figure that Mr. Wriford laughed aloud again and felt run through him a surge of reckless irresponsibility; and Mr. Puddlebox laughed in return, loud and long, and looking down the hill observed: "We will now leave this place of blood and wounds and almost of unseemly quarrel. Ascending towards us I observe a wagon, stoutly horsed. We will attach ourselves to the back of it and place ourselves entirely at its disposal; first greeting the wagoner in song, for the very juice of life is to be extracted by finding matter for praise in all things. Now, then, when he reaches us — 'O ye wagoners —'"

The wagon reached them. Piled high with sacks, it was drawn by three straining horses and driven by a very burly gentleman who sat on a seat above his team and midway up the sacks and scowled very blackly at the pair who awaited him and who, as he drew abreast, gave him, Mr. Puddlebox with immense volume and Mr. Wriford with gleeful irresponsibility:

"O ye wagoners of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever!"

The wagoner's reply was to spit upon the ground for the singers' benefit and very brutally to lash his team for his own. The horses strained into a frightened and ungainly plunging, and the wagon lumbered ahead. Mr. Puddlebox plunged after it, and Mr. Wriford,

with light-headed squirms of laughter, after Mr. Puddlebox. The tail-board of the wagon was not high above the road. In a very short space Mr. Wriford was seated upon it and then clutching and hauling in assistance of the prodigious bounds and scrambles with which, at last, Mr. Puddlebox also effected the climb.

And so away, with dangling legs.





1

BOOK TWO
ONE OF THE JOLLY ONES



BOOK TWO

ONE OF THE JOLLY ONES

CHAPTER I

INTENTIONS, BEFORE HAVING HIS HAIR CUT, OF A
WAGONER

IN this company, and with this highly appropriate beginning of legs dangling carelessly above the dusty highroad from a stolen seat on the tail-board of a wagon, there began to befall Mr. Wriford many adventures which, peculiar and unusual for any man, were, for one of Mr. Wriford's station in life and of his character and antecedents, in the highest degree extraordinary. His dangling legs — and the fact that he swung them as they dangled — were, indeed, emblematic of the frame of mind which took him into these adventures and which — save when the old torments clutched him and held him — carried him through each and very irresponsibly into the next. Through all the later years of his former life he had very much cared what happened to him and what people thought of him when they looked at him. He was filled now with a spirit of not caring at all. It was more than a reckless spirit; it was a conscious spirit. He had often, in the days of

his torment, cried aloud that he wished he might die. He told himself now that he did not mind if he did die, and did not mind if he was hurt or what suffering befell him. Through all the later years of his former life he often had cried aloud, his brain most dreadfully surging, his panic desire to get out of it all. He told himself that he now was out of it all. He had been frantic to be free; he now was free. A very giddiness of freedom possessed him and caused him, at the dizziness of it, to laugh aloud. A very intoxication of irresponsibility filled him and caused in him a fierce lust to exercise it in feats of maddest folly. He only wanted to laugh, as before he very often had wanted to cry or scream. He only wanted to perform wild, senseless pranks, as before he only had desired to be shut away from people — by himself, alone, in the dark. All this increased with every day of the early days in Mr. Puddlebox's company. Now, as he sat beside Mr. Puddlebox on the tail-board of the wagon, and swung his legs and often laughed aloud, he sometimes reflected upon where the wagon was taking them and what would happen, and at the thought that he did not care whither or what, laughed again; and more than once looked at Mr. Puddlebox, blowing and puffing in exhaustion beside him, and scarcely could control an impulse to push him off the tail-board and laugh to see him clutch and expostulate and fall; and once struck his fist against the revolving wheel beside him and laughed aloud to feel the pain and to see his bruised and dusty knuckles.

"Loony," said Mr. Puddlebox, catching the gleaming eyes that were turned upon him in mischievous thought to push him off, "Loony, you're getting unspooked already."

"It's very jolly," said Mr. Wriford, and laughed. "I like this."

"You shall learn to like everything," said Mr. Puddlebox, "and so to be jolly always."

"How do you live?" inquired Mr. Wriford.

"Why," said Mr. Puddlebox, "by liking everything, for that is the only way to live. Sun, snow; rain, storm; heat, cold; hunger, fullness; fatigue, rest; pain, pleasure; I take all as they come and welcome each by turn or all together. They come from the Lord, boy, and that is how I take them, love them, and return them to the Lord again in form of praise. Selah."

"Dash it," said Mr. Wriford, "you might be a Salvationist, you know."

"Curse me," returned Mr. Puddlebox very cheerfully, "I am nothing of the sort. Would that I were. I will tell you what I am, boy. I am the most miserable sinner that any man could be, and I am the most miserable in this — that I know where mercy comes from, which most poor sinners do not and therefore am less miserable than I. I have outraged my parents, and I outrage heaven in every breath I draw, particularly when, as, curse me, too often it is, my breath is whisky-laden: which thing is abominable to the nose of godliness and very comfortable to my own. I know where mercy comes, loony, on the one hand because I was trained for the ministry, and on the other because I see it daily with my eyes. I know where mercy comes, yet I never can encompass it, for my flesh is ghastly weak and ghastly vile and, curse me, I have worn it thus so long that I prefer it so. But if I cannot encompass mercy, boy, I can return thanks for it; and if it comes in form of scourge — cold, hunger, pain, they

are the three that fright me most — why, I deserve it the more surely and return it in praise the more lustily. That is how I live."

Many days hence it was to befall Mr. Wriford — in very bitter lesson, in hour of deepest anguish — to know a certain beauty in this odd testament of faith.

Just now, of his dizzy mood and of the teller's merry eye as he told it, little more than its whimsicality touched him; and when it was done, "Well, but that doesn't feed you," he said. "In that way — feeding and clothing and the rest of it — how do you live in that way?"

"Why, much in the same," returned Mr. Puddlebox. "Taking what comes, and if need be, which it is my constant prayer it need not, turning my hand to work, of which there is plenty. There is bread and raiment in every house, some for asking, some for working, and always some to get rid of me when I begin to work. What there is not in every house, boy, is whisky, and it is for that my brow has to sweat when, as now, my bottle is empty. But there are," continued Mr. Puddlebox, beginning to wriggle in his seat and draw up his legs with the evident intention of standing upon them, "there are, happily, or, curse me, unhappily, other ways of getting whisky; and the first is never to lose an opportunity of looking for it."

Mr. Puddlebox's feet were now upon the tail-board and he was clutching at the sacks, in great exertion to stand upright.

"What now?" inquired Mr. Wriford, beginning to laugh again.

"Why, to look for it," said Mr. Puddlebox. "In every new and likely place I always look for whisky.

If none, I sing very heartily 'O ye disappointments' and am the better both for the praise and for the fact there is none. If some, I am both grateful and, curse me, happy. The top of these sacks is a new place, my loony, and a very likely. Our kind coachman, as I observed, wore no coat and had no bundle, nor were these beside him. They are likely on top."

"I'll come with you," said Mr. Wriford. "It's a devil of a climb."

"It's a devil of a prize," responded Mr. Puddlebox, "if it's there."

It proved to be both the one and the other. The sacks, stacked in ridges, provided steps of a sort, but each was of prodigious height, of very brief foothold, and the sacks so tightly stuffed as to afford but a scraping, digging hold for the fingers. When to these difficulties was added the swaying of the whole as the wagon jolted along, there was caused on the part of the climbers much panic clutching at each other, at the ropes which bound the sacks, and at the sacks themselves, together with much blowing and sounds of fear from Mr. Puddlebox, vastly incommoded by his bulging coat-tails, and much hysterical mirth from Mr. Wriford, incommoded no little by laughter at the absurdity of the escapade and at imagination of the grotesque spectacle they must present as they swarmed.

He was first to reach the summit. "By Jove, there's a coat here, anyway!" he cried.

Mr. Puddlebox bulged up and plunged forward on his face with a last convulsive scramble. "And, by my sins, a bottle!" cried Mr. Puddlebox, drawing the coat aside. "Beer, I fear me — a filling and unsatisfactory

drink." He drew the cork and applied his nose. "Whisky!" and applied his mouth.

"Good Lord!" cried Mr. Wriford, astonished at a thought that came to him with the length of Mr. Puddlebox's drink. "Man alive! Do you drink it neat?"

"*Hup!* Curse me," said Mr. Puddlebox, "I do. It takes less room. *Hup!* This is the most infernal torment, this hupping. I must, but I never can, drink more, *hup!* slowly. As a rule," continued Mr. Puddlebox, balancing on his knees and fumbling in his coat-tail pockets, "as a rule I never rob a man of his bottle. If a man has a bottle, he has an encouragement towards thrift and sobriety. It is a persuasion to put his whisky there instead of at one draught into his mouth. For the moment I must suspend the by-law. I cannot decant this gentleman's whisky into my own bottle, for our carriage shakes and would cause loss. And I cannot exchange for this bottle my own, for to mine I am deeply attached. Therefore —" Mr. Puddlebox fumbled the bottle into his pocket, appeared to find some difficulty in accommodating it, produced it again and took another drink from it and, as if this had indeed diminished its bulk, this time slid it home, where Mr. Wriford heard it clink a greeting with its empty fellow. "Therefore," said Mr. Puddlebox — "*hup!*"

"Well, mind they don't break," said Mr. Wriford. "Let's have a look where we're getting to," and he squirmed himself on elbows and knees towards the front of the sacks and stretched out, face downwards.

"I never yet," said Mr. Puddlebox proudly, "committed the crime of breaking a bottle." From his knees he took an observation down the road ahead of him,

announced: "We are getting towards the pretty hamlet of Ditchenhanger," and coming forward lay full length by Mr. Wriford's side.

This position brought their heads, overhanging the sacks, immediately above the wagoner seated a long arm's length below them, his horses walking, the reins slack in his hands and himself, to all appearances, in something of a doze. A very large man, as Mr. Wriford had previously noticed, with prodigious arms, bare to the elbow; and at his unconsciousness of their presence, hanging immediately above him, and at his sullen face and the rage upon it if he knew, Mr. Wriford was moved to silent squirms of laughter, and turned a laughing face to Mr. Puddlebox's, suspended over the sacks beside him.

"*Hup!*" said Mr. Puddlebox with shattering violence.

The wagoner started not less violently, looked about him with jerking, savage head, while Mr. Wriford held his breath and dared not move, uttered an oath of extraordinarily unsavoury character, grabbed at his whip, and lashed with all the force of his arm at his horses.

The nature of their response exercised a very obvious result upon the wagon. It suffered a jerk that caused from Mr. Wriford a frantic clutch at the sacks and from Mr. Puddlebox a double explosion that cost him (as he afterwards narrated) very considerable pain.

"*Huppup!*" said Mr. Puddlebox. "Blink! *Hup!*" and with this his pudding-bowl hat detached itself from his head and dropped lightly into the wagoner's lap. That gentleman immediately produced another oath, compared with which his earlier effort was as a sweet

smelling rose at dewy morn, drew up his unfortunate team even more violently than he had urged them forward, with very loud bellows bounded to the road and, whip in hand, completed a very rapid circuit of his wagon, bawling the while a catalogue of astoundingly blood-curdling intentions which he proposed to wreak upon somebody before, as he phrased it, he had his blinking hair cut.

His passengers, considerably alarmed at these proceedings, withdrew to the exact centre of the sacks and there reflected, each in the other's face, his own dismay.

"Now you've done it, you silly ass," said Mr. Wri-ford.

"It's not over yet," said Mr. Puddlebox. "I'm afraid this is going to be very rough."

CHAPTER II

PASSIONATE ATTACHMENT TO LIVER OF A WAGONER

"YOU'RE up there, ain't yer?" demanded the wagoner, arrived at the other side of the wagon and bawling from the road. "You're up there, aren't yer? I've got you, my beauty! I'll cut your liver out for yer before I have my blinkin' hair cut! I've got you, my beauty! You're up there, aren't yer?"

Mr. Puddlebox poked his head very timidly over the side, looked down upon their questioner, and remarked in a small thin voice: "Yes — hup!" He then drew back very hastily, for at sight of him the wagoner with a very loud bellow rushed forward and smote upward with his whip in a manner fully calculated, to the minds of his passengers, to cut up a sack or lay open a liver with equal precision. "Come down off out of it!" bellowed this passionate gentleman, flogging upward with appalling whistle and thud of his lash. "Come down off out of it. I'll cut your liver out, my beauty! I'll cut your coat off your back, before I have my blinkin' hair cut."

Perceiving that the angry lash fell safely short of its aim, Mr. Puddlebox again protruded his head.

"Now are you coming down," demanded the flaming wagoner, "or am I coming up for you?"

"I should like to explain —" began Mr. Puddlebox.

"I'll explain you!" roared the wagoner. "I'll ex-

plain you, my beauty! Are you coming down off out of it?"

"What are you going to do if I do come?" inquired Mr. Puddlebox.

The carter, in a voice whose violence seemed likely to throttle him, announced as his intention that he proposed to cut out Mr. Puddlebox's liver with his whip and then, having extracted it, to dance upon it.

"Well, I won't come," said Mr. Puddlebox. "In that case, I think I'll stay here," he said, and said it with a nervous little giggle that shot out of the wagoner an inarticulate bellow of fury and a half-dozen of terrific blows towards Mr. Puddlebox's anxious face.

"Come down off out of it!" bellowed the carter. "I'll cut your liver out before I have my blinkin' hair cut, my beauty."

The same nervous giggle again escaped the unfortunate beauty whose liver was thus passionately demanded. "But your hair doesn't want cutting," said Mr. Puddlebox, "really — *hup!*"

"You fool!" Mr. Wriford cried. "You utter fool!" and in dramatic illustration of Mr. Puddlebox's folly, the wagon began to shake with the violence of the wagoner's ascent of it, and there preceded the ascent, increasing in horror as it approached, an eruption of astoundingly distressing oaths mingled in the most blood-curdling way with references to liver and other organs which were to be subjected at one and the same time to step-dances and to a ferocious orgy of surgical and cannibalistic practices.

Mr. Wriford was frightened. There went out of him the reckless glee in mad adventure that had possessed him on the wagon till now. There returned to him,

dreadfully as if a hand within him were tugging at his vitals, twirling in his brain, drumming in his heart, the coward fear that well of old he knew.

"Down!" cried Mr. Puddlebox. "Down behind, loony! quick!" and began to scramble backwards.

There came to Mr. Wriford some odd experiences. He looked at Mr. Puddlebox and saw in the little round face where usually was merriment, alarm, white and sickly. Then saw Mr. Puddlebox's eyes search his own, and waver, and then fill with some purpose. Then was pulled and pushed backward by Mr. Puddlebox. Then both were hanging, half over the sacks, half on top. Then over the front of the wagon before them appeared the wagoner's cap and a vast arm clutching the whip. Then Mr. Puddlebox scrambled forward a yard, placing himself between Mr. Wriford and the approaching fury. "Down you go, loony; he's not seen you. Hide yourself, boy." Then Mr. Puddlebox's elbow and then his knee at Mr. Wriford's chest, and Mr. Wriford was slithered down the sacks and fallen in the road.

Now from above, and before yet Mr. Wriford could get to his feet, very quick things. Baleful howl from the flaming wagoner standing on his driver's seat and towering there in omnipotent command of the wagon-top. Appalling whistle-*wup* of the whip in his mighty and ferocious hand. Pitiful yelps from Mr. Puddlebox, head and shoulders exposed, baggy stern, surmounted by the bulging pockets, suspended above Mr. Wriford in the road and wriggling this way and that as the whip fell. Baleful howl from the flaming wagoner and the whistle-*wup!* at each loudest word of it: "Now, my beauty, I've GOT yer!"

Pitiful yelp from Mr. Puddlebox: "Yowp! Hup!"

"Now I'll CUT your liver out for yer." — "Yeep! Hup!"

"Before I have my ~~BLINKIN'~~ 'air cut." — "Yowp!"

"Now I'll CUT your liver out, my beauty." — "Yowp! Yeep! Hup! Hell!"

Beneath the blows and the convulsive wriggings they caused, Mr. Puddlebox's stern slipped lower down the sacks. Mr. Wriford scrambled to his feet from where he was fallen to the road. He was utterly terrified. He turned to run. He stopped, and a cry of new fear escaped him. Figure of Wriford stood there.

Mr. Wriford put a hand before his eyes and went a few steps to the side of the wagon and stopped again, irresolute.

There came from above again that bellow, again whistle-wup! of the whip, again from Mr. Puddlebox in agonized response: "Yowp! Hup!"

Mr. Wriford cried aloud: "Oh, why doesn't he drop down?"

It seemed to him that Figure of Wriford turned upon him with flaming eyes and grinding teeth and for the first time spoke to him: "Why, to give you time to get away and hide — to save you, you filthy coward!"

Mr. Wriford cried: "Oh — oh!"

And at once a dramatic change of scene. In one sudden and tremendous bound the flaming wagoner hurled himself from the seat to the road, rushed bawling around his wagon on the opposite side from where Mr. Wriford trembled, came full beneath the hanging stern of Mr. Puddlebox, and discharged upon it a cut of his whip that made pretty caresses of his former efforts. "Now I've got you, my beauty!"

With a loud and exceeding bitter cry, the beauty released his hold. As thunders the mountain avalanche, so thundered he. As falls the stricken oak so, avalanched, the flaming wagoner fell beneath him.

There was a very loud crash of breaking bottles, and immediately upon the hot summer air a pungent reek of whisky. There were enormous convulsions of Mr. Puddlebox and the wagoner entwined in one great writhing double monster prone in the roadway, and from them a tremendous cloud of dust. There were thuds, oaths, *yowps*, *yeeeps*, bellows, and with them the pleasant music of broken bottles jangling. The double monster came to its four knees and writhed there; very laboriously — as if it were a rheumatic giant — writhed to its four legs and there stood and writhed amain; divided suddenly, and there was an appalling wallop from one to the other, and Mr. Puddlebox went reeling, musically jangling, and the flaming wagoner, carried round by the wallop's impetus, came staggering sideways a pace towards Mr. Wriford.

Mr. Wriford put down his head and shut his eyes and rushed at him. Mr. Wriford, as he rushed, saw Figure of Wriford disappear as if swallowed. Mr. Wriford caught his foot in the wheel, was discharged like a butting ram at the backs of the flaming wagoner's knees, clutched, wrenched, was down with the bawling wagoner beating at his head, and then, clutching and struggling, was overturned beneath him. Mr. Wriford heard a yell, first of warning, then of triumph, from Mr. Puddlebox: "Keep out of it, loony! Well done, boy! Well done! Glumph him, boy! Glumph him!" There was a terrible run and kick from Mr. Puddlebox, and a terrible jerk and cry from the flaming wagoner, and in

the next moment Mr. Wriford was on his feet and taking share, his eyes mostly shut, in a whirlwind, three-sided battle that spun up the road and down the road and across the road, and in which sometimes Mr. Wriford hit Mr. Puddlebox, and sometimes Mr. Puddlebox hit Mr. Wriford, and sometimes both hit the wagoner and sometimes by him were hit — a whirlwind, three-sided battle, in which, in short, by common intent of the three, the thing to do was simply to *hit* and to roar. Six arms whirling enormous thumps; six legs lashing tremendous kicks; the air and three bodies receiving them; one mouth bawling curses of the very pit of obscenity; another howling: "Glumph him, boy! Glumph him!" Mr. Wriford's mouth laughing with fierce, exultant, hysterical glee.

The sudden rush that had rid Mr. Wriford of Figure of Wriford had returned him, and returned him with recklessness a hundredfold, to the mood, reckless of what happened to him, that had first embarked him on the wagon. And more than that. Out of the clutch of cowardice and lusting into the lust of action! When swinging his legs over the tail-board of the wagon, he had but gleefully thought of how now he was free, of caring nothing what happened to him, of gleefully throwing himself into any mad adventure. He had but thought of it; now he was in it! in it! in it! and in it! became the slogan of his fighting as he fought. "In it!" and a blind whirling wallop at the flaming wagoner's flaming face. "In it!" and colliding heavily with one of Mr. Puddlebox's glumphing rushes, and laughing aloud. "In it!" and spun staggering with a thump of one of the wagoner's whirling sledge-hammers, and staggering but to come with a fierce glee "In it! In it!" once again. Out of

the clutch of cowardice that had him a moment before — cowardice bested for the first time in all these years of its nightmare sovereignty: and at that thought “In it! in it! in it!” with fierce and fiercer lust and fierce and fiercer and fiercest exultation. “In it!” Ah!

This extraordinary battle — extraordinary for a shrinking, gentlemanly, refined, well-dressed, comfortably housed, afternoon-tea-drinking Londoner — raged, if it had any order at all, about the towering person of the liver-cutting wagoner, and now went bawling to its end.

For this gentleman would no sooner get the liver of one antagonist in his fiery clutches than the other would come at him like a runaway horse and require attention that resulted in the escape of the first. And now a liver, heavily embedded in the bulky waist of Mr. Puddlebox, came at him head down with a force and with a fortune of aim that not even a stouter man than the wagoner could have withstood.

A very terrible buffet had just been inflicted upon Mr. Puddlebox. A sledge-hammer wallop from the wagoner had caught him in the throat (“*Ooop!*”) and remained there, squeezing (“*Arrpl!*”). The other hand had then clawed him like a tiger’s bite in close proximity to his coveted liver (“*Arrpl! Ooop!*”); and the two hands had finally hurled him ten feet away to end in a most shattering fall (“*UMP!*”). This manoeuvre was carried out by the flaming wagoner from the side of the ditch to which repeated rushes had driven him, and now he turned and directed a stupendous kick at Mr. Wriford, who came fiercely on his left. Mr. Wriford twisted; the immense boot but scraped him.

Then Mr. Puddlebox — the flaming wagoner on one leg, vitally exposed.

Mr. Puddlebox, head down, eyes shut, arms stretched behind him, hymned on to victory by the music of the broken bottles in his coat-tails, bounding across the road at the highest speed of which he was capable and into the liver-cutting gentleman's own liver and wind with stunning and irresistible force and rich clash of jangling glass.

Prone into the ditch the liver-cutting gentleman and there lay — advertising his presence only by those distressing groans which are at once the symptom of a winding and the only sound of which a winded is capable.

Mr. Puddlebox, also in the ditch, separated himself from the stricken mass and, stepping upon it, emerged upon the victorious battle-field rubbing his head.

A very loud, panting "Hurrah!" from Mr. Wriford; but before further felicitations could be exchanged, attention was demanded by a fourth party to the scene, who had been approaching unobserved for some time, and who now arrived and announced himself with: "Now then — hur!"

CHAPTER III

DISTURBED EQUIPOISE OF A COUNTERBALANCING MACHINE

THIS was a sergeant of police, short, red, hot, neckless, filled with a seeming excess of bile, or of self-importance, which he must needs correct or affirm — according as it was the one or the other — with a *hur!* at the end of each sentence, and balanced by prodigious development in the rear against the remarkable fullness beneath his tunic in the front, which he carried rather as though it were a drum or some other detachable article that must be conducted with care.

Mr. Wriford was a little tickled at this gentleman's appearance and, of the reckless mood that had him — panting, flaming, bruised, exulting — was not at all inclined to be hectored in the way that the *hur!* seemed to suggest was the sergeant's custom. Trained, however, to the Londoner's proper respect for a policeman, he answered, still panting: "There's been a bit of a fight."

"Saw that — hur!" said the sergeant. "Three of you when I come along. Where's the other — hur!"

"In the ditch," said Mr. Wriford. "Can't you hear him?"

The sergeant carried his drum carefully to the sound of the winded groans and, lowering it so far as he was able, peered over its circumference at the prostrate wagoner. In this position his posterior development,

called upon to exercise its counterbalancing effect in the highest degree, displayed itself to immense advantage, and Mr. Wriford eyed it with a twitching of his face that spoke of a sudden freakish thought.

The sergeant readjusted his drum and turned upon him: "Who's done this? Hur!"

"Been a fight, I tell you," said Mr. Wriford, and laughed at the idea that had been in his mind and at the look it would have caused on the sergeant's face if he had executed it.

The sergeant drew in a breath that raised the drum in a motion that spelt rufflement. "Don't want you to tell me nothing but what you're asked," he said. "Man lying here hurt. Case of assault — hur!" He moved the drum slowly in the direction of Mr. Puddlebox and this time "hured" before he spoke. "Hur! Thought I knew you as I come along. Seen you afore — in the dock, — ain't I?"

"I've been in so many," said Mr. Puddlebox amiably, wiping his face from which the sweat streamed, "that if I've omitted yours, you must put it down to oversight, not unfriendliness."

"None o' that!" returned the sergeant. "No sauce. I know yer. Charged with assault, both of yer, an' anything said used evidence against yer. Hur! Who's this man down here?"

"Look and see if you know him," Mr. Wriford suggested. "I don't."

The drum was again advanced to the ditch, and the counterbalancing operation again very carefully put into process. Mr. Wriford's eyes danced with the wild idea that possessed him. To cap this tremendous hulla-baloo in which he had been in it! in it! in it! To fly

the wildest flight of all! To overturn, with a walloping kick, a policeman!

He drew near to Mr. Puddlebox and pulled his sleeve to attract his attention.

"Why, that's George!" said the sergeant, midway in operation of his counterbalancing machine. "That's old George Huggs — hur!"

"Can't be!" said Mr. Wriford and pulled Mr. Puddlebox's sleeve, and pointed first at the tremendous uniformed stern gingerly lowering the tunic-ed drum, then at his own foot, then down the road.

"Can't be!" returned the sergeant. "What yer mean, can't be! That's Miller Derrybill's George Huggs. George! George, you've got to come out and prosecute. George, I say — hur!"

Mr. Puddlebox, realizing the meaning of Mr. Wriford's pantomime, puffed out his cheeks with laughter bursting to be free and nodded. Mr. Wriford took one quick step and poised his foot at the tremendous target.

"George!" said the sergeant. "George Huggs! Hur!"

"Whoop!" said Mr. Wriford, and lashed.

The counterbalancing machine, not specified for this manner of usage, overturned with the slow and awful movement of a somersaulting elephant. One agonized scream from its owner, one dreadful bellow from George Huggs as the enormous sergeant plunged head foremost upon him — Mr. Wriford and Mr. Puddlebox, shouts of laughter handicapping their progress but impossible of control, at full speed down the road.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

I

CLOSE of this day found the two in the outlying barn of a farm to which, as night fell, Mr. Puddlebox had led the way. There had intervened between it and the glorious battle-field an imperial midday banquet at an inn provided by Mr. Wriford, who found sixteen shillings in his pocket and had expended upon the meal four, upon sundries for further repasts one, and upon a bottle of whisky to replace the music in Mr. Puddlebox's coat-tail three and six. Thence a long amble to put much countryside between themselves and the mighty gentlemen left in the ditch, and so luxuriously to bed upon delicious hay, three parts of the whisky in the bottle, the other quarter comfortably packed into Mr. Puddlebox.

Through the banquet and through the day there had been bursts of laughter, started by one and immediately chorused by the other, at recollections of the stupendous struggle and the stupendous kick; also, prompted by Mr. Wriford, reiterated conversation upon a particular aspect of the affair.

"I did my share?" Mr. Wriford would eagerly inquire.

"Loony, you did two men's share," Mr. Puddlebox

would reply. "And your kick of the policeman was another two men's — four men's share, boy. I didn't want you in it, loony. You're not fit for such, I thought. But you glumphed 'em, boy! You glumphed 'em like six men! Loony, you're unspooking — you're unspooking double quick!"

Mr. Wriford thrilled at that and laughed aloud and swung his arms in glee, and through the advancing night, lying warmly in the hay by Mr. Puddlebox's side, continued to feast upon it and to chuckle over it; and while he feasted and chuckled very often said to himself: "And that's the way to get rid of myself following me. When I was frightened by the wagon, he came. When I was walloping and smashing, he went and hasn't come back. Very well. Now I know."

II

Mr. Wriford enjoyed some hours of dreamless sleep. He awoke, and on the hay and in the darkness lay awake and thought.

"Well, this is a very funny state of affairs," Mr. Wriford thought. "Except that I'm in a barn and shall get locked up for a tramp if I'm caught, or at least into a devil of a row with the farmer if he catches me, I'm dashed if I know where I am. I've stolen a ride on a wagon, and I've had a most extraordinary fight in the road with the chap who was driving it. My eyes were shut half the time. I wonder I wasn't killed. I must have got some fearful smashes. I suppose I didn't feel them — you don't when your blood's up. I belted him a few stiff 'uns, though; by gad, I did! I don't know how I had the pluck. I wonder what's the matter with

me — I mean to say, me! fighting a chap like that. And then I kicked a policeman. Good Lord, you know — that's about the most appalling thing a man can do! Kicked him bang over — heels over head! By gad, he did go a buster, though!" And at recollection of the buster that the police sergeant went, Mr. Wriford began to laugh and laughed quietly for a good while.

Then he began to think again. "I chucked myself into the river," Mr. Wriford thought. "I'd forgotten that. I've not thought about it since I did it. Good Lord, that was a thing to do! I didn't mean to. One moment I was walking along the Embankment, and the next I was falling in. I wonder what I did in between — how I got up, how I got in. I wanted to die. Yes, I tried to drown and die. I suppose I'm not dead? No, I can't possibly be dead. Everything's funny enough to be another world, but I take my oath I'm not dead. This chap Puddlebox — which can't possibly be his real name — thinks I'm mad. But I'm absolutely not mad. I may be dead — I know I'm not, though; at least I'm pretty sure I'm not — but I'm dashed if I'm mad. I've been too near madness — God knows — not to know it when I see it. Those sort of rushes-up in my head — I might have gone mad any time with one of those. Well, they're gone. I'll never have another; I feel absolutely sure of that. My head feels empty — feels as though it was a different part of me, like I've known my foot feel when it's gone to sleep and I can touch it without feeling it. Before, my head used to feel full, cram full. That's the only difference and that's not mad: it's just the reverse, if anything. What about seeing myself? Who am I then? I mean to say, am I the one I can see or the one I think I am? Well, the thing is, is there any

one there when I see him or is it only imagination, only a delusion? If it's a delusion, then it's madness and I'm mad. Well, the very fact that I know that, proves it isn't a delusion and proves I'm absolutely sane; the very fact that I can lie here and argue about it and that I can't see it now because it isn't here, and can see it sometimes because it is there — that very fact proves I'm not mad. I think I know what it is. It's the same sort of thing as I remember once or twice years ago, when I first came to London and had a night out with some men and got a bit tipsy. I remember then sort of seeing myself — sort of trying to pull myself together and realise who I really was; and while I was trying, I could see myself playing the fool and staggering about and making an ass of myself. It was the drink that did that — that kind of separated me into two. Now I've done the same thing by trying to drown myself and nearly succeeding and by coming into this extraordinary state of affairs after living in a groove so long. Part of me is still in that old life and gets the upper hand of me sometimes, just as the drink used to. I've only got to realise that I've done with all that, and I've only got to smash about and not care what happens to me, and I'm all right.

"And I have done with it," cried Mr. Wriford aloud and fiercely, and sitting up and continuing to speak very quickly. "I *have* done with it! All these years I've been shut up and never enjoyed myself like other men. I've given up my life to others and got mixed up in their troubles and never been able to live for myself. Now I'm going to begin life all over again. I'm not going to care for anybody. I'm just going to let myself — *go!* I'm not going to care what happens. I'm not going to

think of other people's feelings. I'm not going to be polite or care a damn what anybody thinks. If I get hurt, I'm just going to be hurt and not care. If I want to do what would have seemed wrong in the old days, I'm just going to do it and not care. I've cared too much! that's what's been wrong with me. Now I'm not going to care for anything or anybody. This chap Puddlebox said that what was wrong with me was that I thought too much about myself. I remember Brida telling me the same thing once. That's just exactly what it's not. All my life I've thought too much about other people. That's been the trouble. Done! Whoop, my boy, it's done! There's not going to be anybody in the world for myself except me — yes, and not even me. I'm going to be outside it all and just look on — and this me lying here can do what it likes, anything it likes. Hurt itself, starve itself, chuck itself down — that's one of the things I want to do: to get up somewhere and chuck myself down *smash!* and see what happens and laugh at it, whatever it is. I'm simply not going to care. I belong to myself — or rather myself belongs to me, and I'm going to do what I like with it — just exactly what I like. Puddlebox!"

Mr. Wriford turned to the recumbent form beside him to nudge it into wakefulness, but found it already awake. The gleam of Mr. Puddlebox's open eyes was to be seen in the darkness, and Mr. Puddlebox said: "Loony, how many of you are here this morning?"

"There's only me," said Mr. Wriford. "I'm not going to care —"

"You're spooked again, loony," Mr. Puddlebox interrupted him. "I've been listening to you talking."

"Well, you can listen to this," said Mr. Wriford.

"I'm not going to care a damn what happens to me or care a hang for anybody — you or anybody."

"Very well," said Mr. Puddlebox. "That's settled."

"So it is," said Mr. Wriford, "and I tell you what I'm going to do first."

Sufficient of morning was by now stealing through cracks and crevices of the barn to radiate its gloom. Two great doors admitted to the interior. Between them ran a gangway of bricked floor with hay stacked upwards to the roof on either hand. Mr. Wriford could almost touch the roof where now he stood up, his feet sinking in the hay, and could see the top of the ladder by which overnight they had climbed to their bed. "What I'm going to do first," said Mr. Wriford, pointing to the gangway beneath them, "is to jump down there and see what happens."

"Well, I'll tell you what you are going to do last," returned Mr. Puddlebox, "and that also is jump down there, because you'll break your neck and that'll be the end of you, boy."

"I'm going to see," said Mr. Wriford. "*Smash!* That's just what I want to see."

"Half a minute," said Mr. Puddlebox and caught Mr. Wriford's coat. "Just a moment, my loony, for there's some one else wants to see also. There's some one coming in."

CHAPTER V

INTENTIONS, IN HIS NIGHTSHIRT, OF A FARMER

It was symptomatic of Mr. Wriford's state in these days that any interruption at once diverted him from his immediate purpose and turned him eagerly to whatever new excitement offered. So now, and here was an excitement that promised richly. Perched up there in the darkness and with the guilty knowledge of being a trespasser, it was a very tingling thing to hear the sounds to which Mr. Puddlebox had called attention and, peering towards the door from which they came, to speculate into what alarms they should develop. This was speedily discovered. The sounds proceeded from the door opposite to that by which entry had been made overnight, and from fumbling passed into a jingling of keys, a turning of the lock, and so gave admittance to a gleam of yellow light that immediately was followed by a man bearing a lantern swinging from his left hand and in his right a bunch of keys.

This was a curious gentleman who now performed curious actions. First he peered about him, holding the lantern aloft, and this disclosed him to be short and very ugly, having beneath a black growth on his upper lip yellow teeth that protruded and came down upon his lower. This gentleman was hatless and in a shirt without collar lumped so bulgingly into the top of his trousers as to present the idea that it was very

long. Indeed, as he turned about, the lantern at arm's length above his head, it became clear to those who watched that this was his nightshirt that he wore. Next he set down the lantern, locked the door by which he had entered, placed across it an iron bar which fell into a bracket on either side, took up his light again, and proceeded along the gangway.

All this he did very stealthily — turning the key so that the lock could scarcely be heard as it responded, fitting his iron bar, first with great attention on the one side and then on the other, and then walking forward on his toes with manifest straining after secrecy. A rat scurried in the straw behind him, and he twisted round towards it as though terribly startled, with a quick hiss of his breath and with his hand that held the keys clapped swiftly to his heart.

Now he came beneath the stack upon which our two trespassers watched and wondered, and there remained for a space lost from view. There was to be heard a clinking as though he operated with his lantern, and with it a shuffling as though he disturbed the straw. Next he suddenly went very swiftly to the further door, passed through it in haste, and could be heard locking it from the outside, then wrenching at the key as though in a great hurry to be gone, then gone.

"That's funny," said Mr. Wriford. "Was he looking for something?"

"He was precious secret about it," said Mr. Puddlebox.

"Damn it," cried Mr. Wriford, "he's left his lamp behind. You can see the gleam."

Mr. Puddlebox, like curious hound that investigates the breeze, sat with chin up and with twitching nose;

then sprang to his feet. "Curse it," cried Mr. Puddlebox, "he's set the place afire! Skip, loony, skip, or we're trapped!" and Mr. Puddlebox hurled himself towards the ladder, reversed himself upon it, missed a rung in his haste, and with a very loud cry disappeared with great swiftness, and with a very loud bump crashed with great force to the ground.

Mr. Wriford followed. Mr. Wriford, with no very clear comprehension of what was toward, but very eager, also slipped, also slithered, and also crashed.

"Hell!" cried Mr. Puddlebox. "Blink! Get *off* me, loony!"

Mr. Wriford was raised and rolled as by convulsion of a mountain beneath him. As he rolled, he had a glimpse of the lantern embedded in a nest of straw, its smoky flame naked of chimney, and from the flame towards the straw a strip of cloth with a little red smoulder midway upon it. As he sat up, the smoulder flared to a little puff of flame, ran swiftly down the cloth, flared again in the straw, then was eclipsed beneath the mighty Puddlebox, bounded forward from hands and knees upon it.

"The lamp, boy!" bellowed Mr. Puddlebox.

Mr. Wriford dashed at the lamp, bestowed upon it all the breath he could summon, and flattened himself beside Mr. Puddlebox upon a spread of flame that, as he blew, ran from lantern to straw.

"Good boy!" said Mr. Puddlebox. "That was quick," and himself at once did something quicker. Very cautiously first he raised his body upon his hands and knees, squinted beneath it, then dropped it again with immense swiftness and wriggled it violently into the straw. "I'm still burning down here," cried Mr.

Puddlebox, and turned a face of much woe and concern towards Mr. Wriford, and inquired: "How's yours, loony?"

Mr. Wriford went through the first, or cautious, portion of Mr. Puddlebox's performance and announced: "Mine's out. Get up and let's have a look."

"Why," said Mr. Puddlebox irritably, "how to the devil can I get up? If I get up it will burst out, and if I lie here I shall be slowly roasted alive. This is the most devil of a predicament that ever a man was in, and I will challenge any man to be in a worse. *Unch*—my stomach is already like a pot on the fire. *Ooch!* *Blink.*"

"Well, the fire's simply gaining while you lie there," cried Mr. Wriford. "I can smell it. It's simply gaining, you ass."

"Ass!" cried Mr. Puddlebox. "Ass! I tell you it is you will look an ass and a roast ass if I move. I can get no weight on it to crush it like this. *Unch!* What I am going to do is to turn over and press it down, moreover I can bear roasting better on that other side of me. Now be ready to give me a hand if the flames burst, and be ready to run, loony—up the ladder and try the roof."

Mr. Puddlebox then raised his chest upon his arms, made a face of great agony as the released pressure caused his stomach to feel the heat more fiercely, then with a stupendous convulsion hurled himself about and gave first a very loud cry as the new quarter of his person took the fire and then many wriggles and a succession of groans as with great courage he pressed his seat down upon the smouldering embers. Lower he wriggled, still groaning. "Ah," groaned Mr. Puddlebox. "Arp.

Ooop. Erp. Blink. Eep. Erps. Ooop. Hell!" He then felt about him with his hands, and with the fingers of one finding what he sought and finding it uncommonly hot, brought his fingers to his mouth with a bitter yelp; fumbled again most cautiously, wriggled yet more determinedly, groaned anew, yet at longer intervals, and presently, a beaming smile overspreading his countenance, raised an arm aloft and announced triumphantly: "Out!"

"Out!" repeated Mr. Puddlebox, rising and beating smoulder from his waistcoat with one hand and from his trousers with the other.

"You were devilish plucky," said Mr. Wriford. "I can't help laughing now it's over, you know. But it was a narrow squeak. You were quick getting down, and you saved both our lives by hanging on like that."

"Why, you were quick, too, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox. "You were quick after me as a flash — and plucky. I'd not have done it alone. You're coming on, boy; you're coming on. You're unspooking every minute."

"I did nothing," said Mr. Wriford. But he was secretly glad at the praise, and this, joined to his earlier determination to care nothing for anybody nor for what happened to him, spurred him to give eager aid to what Mr. Puddlebox now proposed.

"I am parboiled in front," said Mr. Puddlebox, finishing his beating of himself, "and I am underdone behind; but the fire is out, and now it is for us to get out. Loony, that was a damned, cold-blooded villain that came here to burn us, and a damned ugly villain as ever I saw, and I will challenge any man to show me

an uglier. There is a lesson to be taught him, my loony, and there is compensation to be paid by him; and this he shall be taught and shall pay before I am an hour older in sin."

With this Mr. Puddlebox marched very determinedly up the ladder which he had descended very abruptly, and preceded Mr. Wriford across the top of the hay to the point where this was nearest met by the sloping roof. "It's all very fine," doubted Mr. Wriford, addressing the determined back as they made their way, "it's all very fine, Puddlebox, but mind you we look like getting ourselves in a devil of a fix if we go messing round this chap, whoever he is. He's probably the farmer. If he is it looks as if he wanted to fire his barn to get the insurance; and it'll be an easy thing for him, and a jolly good thing, to shove the blame on us. That's what I think."

"Loony," returned Mr. Puddlebox, arrived under the roof and facing him, "you think too much, and that's just what's the matter with you, as I've told you before. To begin with, his barn has not been burnt, and that's just where we've got him. We are heroes, my loony, and I am a burnt hero, and some one's got to pay for it."

Mr. Wriford's reply to this was first a look of sharp despair upon his face and then to raise his fists and drum them fiercely upon his head.

"Why, boy! boy!" cried Mr. Puddlebox and caught Mr. Wriford's hands and held them. "Why, what to the devil is that for?"

"That's for what I was doing!" cried Mr. Wriford. "That's because I stopped to think. I'm never going to think any more, and I'm never going to stop any

more. And if I catch myself stopping or thinking I shall kill myself if need be!"

"Well, why to the devil," said Mr. Puddlebox very quickly, "do you stop to beat yourself instead of doing what I tell you? Where there's a little hole, my loony, there's easy work to make a big one. Here's plenty of little holes in these old tiles of this roof. Up on my shoulders, loony, and get to work on them."

CHAPTER VI

RISE AND FALL OF INTEREST IN A FARMER

SYMPTOMATIC again of Mr. Wriford's condition that his storm was gone as quickly as it came. Now filled him only the adventure of breaking out; and he was no sooner, with much laughter, straddled upon Mr. Puddlebox's shoulders and pulling at the tiles, than with smallest effort the little holes in the weather-worn roofing became the large one that Mr. Puddlebox had promised.

"Whoa!" cried Mr. Puddlebox, plunging in the yielding hay beneath Mr. Wriford's weight.

"Whoa!" echoed Mr. Wriford, and to check the staggering grabbed at the crumbling tiles.

"Blink!" cried Mr. Puddlebox and collapsed. "Curse me, is the roof come in on us?"

Mr. Wriford extricated himself and stood away, rubbing his head that had received tiles like discharge of thunderbolts. "A pretty good chunk of it has," said Mr. Wriford. "There's your hole right enough."

This was indeed a great rent capable of accommodating their purpose and more; and Mr. Puddlebox, whose head also needed rubbing, now arose and examined it with his customary cheerfulness. "That's a fine hole, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox, "and a clever one also, for here to this side of it runs a beam which, if it will support us, will have us out, and if it will not, will

fetch the whole roof down and have us out that way. Jump for the beam, boy, while I lift you."

Mr. Puddlebox's hands on either side of Mr. Wriford's hips, jumping him, and then at his legs, shoving him, enabled Mr. Wriford with small exertion soon to be straddled along the roof, and then with very enormous exertion to engage in the prodigious task of dragging Mr. Puddlebox after him. When this was accomplished so far as that Mr. Puddlebox's arms, head and chest were upon the beam and the remainder of his body suspended from it, "It's devilish steep up here," grunted Mr. Wriford, flat on his face, hauling amain on the slack of Mr. Puddlebox's trousers, and not at all at his strongest by reason of much laughter at Mr. Puddlebox's groans and strainings; "it's devilish steep and nothing to hold on to. Look out how you come or you'll have us both over and break our necks."

"Well, when to the devil shall I come?" groaned Mr. Puddlebox. "This is the very devil of a pain to have my stomach in, and I challenge any man to have his stomach in a worse. I must drop down again or I am like to be cut in halves."

"I'll never get you up again if you do," Mr. Wriford told him. "I've got your trousers tight to heave you if you'll swing. Swing your legs sideways, and when I say 'Three' swing them up on the beam as high as you can."

The counting of One and Two set Mr. Puddlebox's legs, aided by Mr. Wriford's hands on his stern, swinging like a vast pendulum. "Hard as you can as you come back," called Mr. Wriford, "and hang on like death when you're up — THREE!"

With a most tremendous swing the boots of the pen-

dulum reached the roof and clawed a foothold. Between heels and one shoulder its powerful stern depended ponderously above the hay. "Heave yourself!" shouted Mr. Wriford, hauling on the trousers. "Roll yourself! Heave yourself!" Mr. Puddlebox heaved enormously, rolled tremendously, and, like the counterbalancing machine of the police sergeant, up came his stern, and prodigiously over.

"Look out!" cried Mr. Wriford. "Look out! Let go, you ass!"

"Blink!" cried Mr. Puddlebox, flat and rolling on the steep pitch of the roof. "Blink! We're killed!" clutched anew at Mr. Wriford, tore him from his moorings, and, knotted with him in panic-stricken embrace, whirled away to take the plunge and then the drop.

The strawyard in which the barn stood was fortunately well bedded in straw about the walls of the building. When, with tremendous thump, with the familiar sound of smashing glass and familiar scent of whisky upon the morning air, the two had come to rest and had discovered themselves unbroken — "Why the dickens didn't you let go of me?" Mr. Wriford demanded. "I could have hung on with one hand and held you."

Mr. Puddlebox sat up with his jolly smile and glancing at the height of their descent gave with much fervour:

"O ye falls of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever!"

Mr. Wriford jumped up and waved his arms and laughed aloud and then cried: "That was all right. Now I'm not caring! Now I'm living!"

"Why, look you, my loony," said Mr. Puddlebox, beaming upon him with immense delight, "look you, that was very much all right; and that is why I return

praise for it. We might have been killed in falling from there, but most certainly we are not killed; and if we had not fallen we should still be up there, and how I should have found heart to make such a devil of a leap I am not at all aware. Here we are down and nothing the worse save for this disaster that, curse me, my whisky is gone again. Thus there is cause for praise in everything, as I have told you, and in this fall such mighty good cause as I shall challenge you or any man to look at that roof and deny. Now," continued Mr. Puddlebox, getting to his feet, "do you beat your head again, boy, or do we proceed to the farmhouse?"

Mr. Wriford said seriously, "No, I'm damned if I beat my head now, because that time I didn't stop and didn't think except just for a second when we were falling, and then I couldn't stop even if I'd wanted to. No, I'm damned if I beat my head this time."

"What it is," said Mr. Puddlebox, emptying his tail-pocket of the broken whisky bottle, and proceeding with Mr. Wriford towards the farmhouse, "what it is, is that you are damned if you *do* beat your head — that is, you are spooked, loony, which is the same thing."

Mr. Wriford paid no apparent attention to this, but his glee at believing that, as he had said, he now was not caring and now was living, gave an excited fierceness to his share in their immediate behaviour, which now became very extraordinary.

CHAPTER VII

PROFOUND ATTACHMENT TO HIS FARM OF A FARMER

I

THE front door of the farmhouse, embowered in a porch, was found to be on the side further from the strawyard. A fine knocker, very massive, hung upon the door, and this Mr. Puddlebox now seized and operated very loudly, with effect of noise which, echoing through the silent house and through the still air of early morning, would in former circumstances have utterly horrified Mr. Wriford and have put him to panic-stricken flight in very natural apprehension of what it would bring forth. Now, however, it had no other effect upon him than first to make him give a nervous gasp and nervous laugh of nervous glee, and next himself to seize the knocker and put into it all the determination of those old days forever ended and these new days of freedom in which he cared for nothing and for nobody now begun.

Fiercely Mr. Wriford knocked until his arm was tired and then flung down the knocker with a last crash and turned on Mr. Puddlebox a flushed face and eyes that gleamed. "I don't care a damn what happens!" he cried.

"My word," said Mr. Puddlebox, gazing at him, "something is like to happen now after all that din. You've got hold of yourself this time, boy."

Mr. Wriford laughed recklessly. "I'll show you," he cried, "I'll show you this time!" and took up the knocker again.

But something was shown without his further effort. His hand was scarcely put to the knocker, when a casement window grated above the porch in which they stood, and a very harsh voice cried: "What's up? Who's that? What's the matter there?" and then with a change of tone: "What's that light in the sky? Is there a fire?"

Mr. Wriford, his new fierceness of not caring, of letting himself go, fierce upon him, was for rushing out of the porch to look up at the window and face this inquiry, but Mr. Puddlebox a moment restrained him. "That's our old villain for sure," Mr. Puddlebox whispered. "There's no ghost of light in the sky that fire would make; but he's prepared for one, and that proves him the old villain that he is."

"Now, then!" rasped the voice. "Who are you down there? What's up? What's that light in the sky?"

Out from the porch charged Mr. Wriford, Mr. Puddlebox with a hand on his arm bidding him: "Go warily, boy; leave this to me."

So they faced the window, and there, sure enough, framed within it, was displayed the gentleman that had been seen with the lantern, with the black scrub upon his upper lip, and with the yellow teeth protruded beneath it.

"That light is the moon," Mr. Puddlebox informed him pleasantly. "Luna, the dear old moon. Queen-Empress of the skies."

"The moon!" shouted the yellow-toothed gentleman.

"The moon! Who the devil are you, and what's your business?"

Mr. Puddlebox responded stoutly to this rough address. "Why, what to the devil else should it be but the moon? Is it something else you're looking for —?"

The yellow-toothed gentleman interrupted him by leaning out to his waist from the window and bellowing: "Something else! Come, what the devil's up and what's your business, or I'll rouse the house and set about the pair of 'ee."

Then Mr. Wriford, no longer to be restrained. Mr. Wriford, fierce to indulge his resolution not to care for anybody and shaking with the excitement of it. Mr. Wriford, to Mr. Puddlebox's much astonishment, in huge and ferocious bawl: "What's up!" bawled Mr. Wriford, hopping about in reckless ecstasy of fierceness. "What's up! Why, you know jolly well what's up, you beastly old villain. Tried to set your barn afire, you ugly-faced old scoundrel! I saw you! I was in there! I saw you with your lamp! Come down, you rotten-toothed old fiend! Come down and have your face smashed, you miserable old sinner!"

The gentleman thus opprobriously addressed disappeared with great swiftness, and immediately could be heard thumping down-stairs with sounds that betokened bare feet.

"That's done it," said Mr. Wriford, wiping his face which was very hot, and placed himself before the porch to await the expected arrival.

"My goodness, it has," said Mr. Puddlebox. "You've let yourself go this time, boy. And what the devil is going to happen next —"

"I'll show you," cried Mr. Wriford and, as the key

turned in the lock and the door opened, proceeded to the demonstration thus promised with a fierceness of action even more astonishing than his earlier outburst of words.

The door was no sooner opened to reveal the yellow-toothed gentleman in his nightshirt and bare feet, than Mr. Wriford rushed upon him, seized him by his flowing garment, and dragged him forth into the yard. Mr. Wriford then revolved very swiftly, causing the yellow-toothed gentleman, who had the wider ambit to perform, to revolve more swiftly yet, and this on naked feet that made him complain very loudly and bound very highly when they lighted upon a stone, spun him in these dizzy circles down the yard, and after a final maze at final speed released him with the result that the yellow-toothed gentleman first performed a giddy whirl entirely on his own account, then the half of another on his heels and in mortal danger of overbalancing, and then, with the best intentions in the world to complete this circuit, was checked by waltzing into his duck-pond, wherein with a very loud shriek he disappeared.

Mr. Wriford again wiped his face, which was now much hotter than before, and with a cry of "Come on!" to Mr. Puddlebox, who was staring in amazement towards the pond and its struggling occupant, made a run to the house. Mr. Puddlebox joined him within the door, and Mr. Wriford then locked the door behind them, and looking very elatedly at Mr. Puddlebox, inquired of him triumphantly: "Well, what about that?"

"Loony," said Mr. Puddlebox, "I never saw the like of it. It's a lick."

"So it is!" cried Mr. Wriford. "I fairly buzzed

him, didn't I? You needn't whisper. There's no one here but ourselves, I'm pretty sure. I'm pretty sure that chap's managed to get the place to himself so that he could make no mistake about getting his barn burnt down. Anyway, I'm going to see, and I don't care a dash if there is." And by way of seeing, Mr. Wriford put up his head and shouted: "Hulloa! Hulloa, is there anybody in here?"

"Hulloa!" echoed Mr. Puddlebox, subscribing with great glee to Mr. Wriford's excitement.

"Hulloa!" cried Mr. Wriford in a very loud voice. "If anybody wants a hit in the eye come along down and ask for it!"

To this engaging invitation there was from within the house no answer; but from without, against the door, a very loud thud which was the yellow-toothed gentleman hurling himself against it, and then his fists beating against it and his voice crying: "Let me in! Let me in, won't you!"

"No, I won't!" called Mr. Wriford, and answered the banging with lusty and defiant kicks. "Get back to your pond or I'll come and throw you there."

"I'm cold," cried the yellow-toothed gentleman, changing his voice to one of entreaty. "Look here, I want to talk to you."

"Go and light your barn again and warm yourself," shouted Mr. Puddlebox; but the laughter with which he shouted it was suddenly checked, for the yellow-toothed gentleman was heard to call: "Hullo! Hi! Jo! Quick, Jo! Come along quick!"

"Boy," said Mr. Puddlebox, "we ought to have got away from this while he was in the pond. What to the devil's going to happen now?"

"Listen," said Mr. Wriford; but they had scarcely listened a minute before there happened a sound of breaking glass in an adjoining room. "They're getting in through a window," cried Mr. Wriford. "We must keep them out."

Several doors led from the spacious old hall in which they stood, and Mr. Puddlebox, choosing one, chose the wrong one, for here was an apartment whose window stood intact and beyond which the sounds of entry could still be heard. A further door in this room that might have led to them was found to be locked and without key. Mr. Puddlebox and Mr. Wriford charged back to the hall, down the hall alongside this room, through a door which led to a passage behind it, and thence through another door which revealed one gentleman in his nightshirt, yellow and black with mire from head to foot, who was reaching down a wide-mouthed gun from the wall, and another gentleman in corduroys, having a bucolic countenance which was very white, who in the act of entry had one leg on the floor and the other through the window.

II

"If they've got in we'll run for it," Mr. Puddlebox had said as they came down the passage. But the room was entered so impetuously that the only running done was, perforce, into it, and at that with a stumbling rush on the part of Mr. Puddlebox into the back of the nightshirt and the collapse of Mr. Wriford over Mr. Puddlebox's heels upon him. Mr. Puddlebox encircled the nightshirt about its waist with his arms; the nightshirt, gun in hand, staggered towards the corduroy and with

the gun swept its supporting leg from under it; the gun discharged itself through its bell-shaped mouth with an appalling explosion; the corduroy with a loud shriek to the effect that he was dead fell upon the head of the nightshirt; and there was immediately a tumult of four bodies with sixteen whirling legs and arms, no party to which had any clear perception as to the limbs that belonged to himself, or any other strategy of campaign than to claw and thump at whatever portion of whoever's body offered itself for the process. There were, with all this, cries of very many kinds and much obscenity of meaning, changing thrice to a universal bellow of horror as first a table and its contents discharged itself upon the mass, then a dresser with an artillery of plates and dishes, and finally a grandfather clock which, descending sideways along the wall, swept with it a comprehensive array of mural decorations.

Assortment of arms and legs was at length begun out of all this welter by the corduroyed gentleman who, finding himself not dead as he had believed, but in great danger of reaching that state in some very horrible form, found also his own hands and knees and upon them crawled away very rapidly towards an adjoining room whose door stood invitingly open. There were fastened to his legs as he did so a pair of hands whose owner he first drew after him, then dislodged by, on the threshold of the open door, beating at them with a broken plate, and having done so, sprung upright to make for safety. The owner of the hands however sprung with him, attached them — and it was Mr. Wriford — to his throat, and thrust him backwards into the adjoining room and into the midst of several shallow pans of milk with which the floor of this room was set.

This apartment was, in fact, the dairy; and here, while thunder and crashing proceeded from the other room in which Mr. Puddlebox and the nightshirt weltered, extraordinary contortions to the tune of great splashing and tin-pan crashing were forced upon the corduroyed gentleman by Mr. Wriford's hands at his throat. Broad shelves encircled this room, and first the corduroyed gentleman was bent backwards over the lowest of these until the back of his head adhered to some pounds of butter, then whirled about and bent sideways until in some peril of meeting his end by suffocation in cream, then inclined to the other side until a basket of eggs were no longer at their highest market value, and finally hurled from Mr. Wriford to go full length and with a large white splash into what pans of milk remained in position on the floor.

Mr. Wriford, with a loud "Ha!" of triumph, and feeling, though greatly bruised in the first portion of the fight and much besmeared with dairy-produce in the second, much more of a man than he had ever felt before, then dashed through the door and locked it upon the corduroy's struggles to free himself from death in a milky grave, and then prepared to give fierce assistance to the drier but as deadly fray still waging between Mr. Puddlebox and the nightshirt.

Upon the welter of crockery and other débris here to view, these combatants appeared to be practising for a combined rolling match, or to be engaged in rolling the litter into a smooth and equable surface. Locked very closely together by their arms, and with equal intensity by their legs, they rolled first to one end of the room or to a piece of overturned furniture and then, as if by common consent, back again to the other end or to an-

other obstacle. This they performed with immense swiftness and with no vocal sounds save very distressed breathing as they rolled and very loud and simultaneous *Ur!* as they checked at the end of a roll and started back for the next.

As Mr. Wriford watched, himself breathing immensely after his own exertions yet laughing excitedly at what he saw, he was given opportunity of taking part by the rollers introducing a new diversion into their exercise. This was provided by the grandfather clock, which, embedded in the débris like a partly submerged coffin, now obstructed their progress. A common spirit of splendid determination not to be stopped by it appeared simultaneously to animate them. With one very loud *Ur!* they came against it; with a second and a third and each time a louder *Ur!* charged it again and again; with a fourth *Ur!* magnificently mounted it; and with a fifth, the débris on this side being lower, plunged down from it. The shock in some degree relaxed their embrace one with the other. From their locked forms a pair of naked legs upshot. Mr. Wriford jumped for the ankles, clutched them amain, and with the information "I've got his legs!" and with its effect, encouraged Mr. Puddlebox to a mighty effort, whereby at length he broke free from the other's grasp, sat upright upon the nightshirt's chest, and then, securing its arms, faced about towards Mr. Wriford, and seated himself upon the nightshirt's forehead.

"Where's yours?" said Mr. Puddlebox, when he had collected sufficient breath for the question.

"Locked up in there," said Mr. Wriford, nodding his head towards the dairy.

"Loony," said Mr. Puddlebox, "this has been the

most devil of a thing that ever any man has been in, and I challenge you or any man ever to have been in a worse."

"I'll have you in a worse," bawled the nightshirt. "I'll —" and as though incapable of giving sufficient words to his intentions he opened his mouth very widely and emitted from it a long and roaring bellow. Into this cavern of his jaws Mr. Puddlebox, now kneeling on the nightshirt's arms, dropped a cloth cap very conveniently abandoned by the corduroy; and then, facing across the prostrate form, Mr. Puddlebox and Mr. Wriford went into a hysteria of laughter only checked at last by the nightshirt, successfully advantageing himself of the weakening effect of their mirth, making a tremendous struggle to overthrow them.

"But, loony," said Mr. Puddlebox when the farmer was again mastered, "we are best out of this, for such a battle I could by no means fight again."

"Well, I don't care," said Mr. Wriford. "I don't care a dash what happens or who comes. Still, we'd better go. First we must tie this chap up and then clean ourselves. My man's all right in there. There's no window where he is — only a grating round the top. I'll find something to fix this one with if you can hold his legs."

This Mr. Puddlebox, by kneeling upon the nightshirt's arms and stretching over them to his legs, was able to do, and Mr. Wriford, voyaging the dishevelled room, gave presently a gleeful laugh and presented himself before Mr. Puddlebox with a wooden box and with information that made Mr. Puddlebox laugh also and the nightshirt, unable to shout, to express his personal view in new and tremendous struggles.

"Nails," said Mr. Wriford, "and a hammer. We'll nail him down;" and very methodically, working along each side of each extended arm, and down each border of the nightshirt pulled taut across his person, proceeded to attach the yellow-toothed gentleman to the floor more literally and more closely than any occupier, unless similarly fastened, can ever have been attached to his boyhood's home.

"There!" said Mr. Wriford, stepping back and regarding his handiwork, which was indeed very creditably performed, with conscionable satisfaction. "There you are, my boy, as tight as a sardine lid, and if you utter a sound you'll get one through your head as well."

This, however, was a contingency which the night-shirt, thanks to the cap in his mouth, was in no great danger of arousing, and leaving him to enjoy the flavour of his gag and his unique metallic bordering, which from the hue of his countenance and the flame of his eyes he appeared indisposed to do, there now followed on the part of Mr. Wriford and Mr. Puddlebox a very welcome and a highly necessary adjustment of their toilets. It was performed by Mr. Puddlebox with his mouth prodigiously distended with a meal collected from the kitchen, and by Mr. Wriford, as he cooled, with astonished reflection upon the extraordinary escapades which he had now added to his exploits of the previous day. "Well, this is a most extraordinary state of affairs for me," reflected Mr. Wriford, much as he had reflected earlier in the morning. "Most extraordinary, I'm dashed if it isn't! I've pretty well killed a chap and drowned him in milk; and I've slung a chap into a pond and then nailed him down by his nightshirt. Well, I'm

doing things at last; and I don't care a dash what happens; and I don't care a dash what comes next."

III

Now this cogitation took place in an upper room whither Mr. Wriford had repaired in quest of soap and brushes, and what came next came at once and came very quickly, being first reported by Mr. Puddlebox, who at this point rushed up-stairs to announce as rapidly as his distended mouth would permit: "Loony, there's a cart come up to the door with four men in it — hulkers!" and next illustrated by a loud knocking responsive to which there immediately arose from the imprisoned corduroy a great shouting and from the gagged and nailed-down nightshirt a muffled blaring as of a cow restrained from its calf.

Very much quicker than might be supposed, and while Mr. Puddlebox and Mr. Wriford stared one upon the other in irresolute concern, these sounds blended into an enormous hullabaloo below stairs which spoke of the entry by the window of the new arrivals, of the release from his gag of the nailed-down nightshirt and from his milky gaol of the imprisoned corduroy, and finally of wild and threatening search which now came pouring very alarmingly up the stairs.

Mr. Wriford locked the door, Mr. Puddlebox opened the window, and immediately their door was first rattled with cries of "Here they are!" and then assailed by propulsion against it of very violent bodies.

The drop from the window was not one to be taken in cold blood. It was taken, nevertheless, side by side and at hurtling speed by Mr. Wriford and by Mr. Puddlebox

through each half of the casement; and this done, and the concussion recovered from, the farm surroundings which divided them from the road were taken also at headlong bounds accelerated when midway across by a loud crash and by ferocious view-hulloas from the window.

The boundary hedge was gained. There was presented to the fugitives a roadside inn having before it, travel-stained, throbbing, and unattended, a very handsome touring motor-car. There was urged upon their resources as they jumped to the road the sight of two men red-hot in their rear and, more alarmingly, three led by the milky corduroy short-cutting towards their flank.

"Blink!" gasped Mr. Puddlebox. "Blink! Hide!" and ran two bewildered paces up the road and three distracted paces down it.

"Hide where?" panted Mr. Wriford, his wits much shaken by his run, by the close sight of the pursuit, and more than ever by Mr. Puddlebox bumping into him as he turned in his first irresolution and colliding with him again as he turned in his second.

"Blink! — Here," cried Mr. Puddlebox, made a dash at the motor-car — Mr. Wriford in bewildered confusion on his heels — opened the door, and closing it behind them, crouched with Mr. Wriford on the floor.

"Run for it the opposite way as soon as they pass us," said Mr. Puddlebox. "This is a very devil of a business, and I will challenge — Here they come!"

But, quicker than they, came also another, and he from the inn. This was a young man in livery of a chauffeur, who emerged very hurriedly wiping his mouth and telling the landlord who followed him: "My

gov'nor won't be half wild if I ain't there by two o'clock." With which he jumped very nimbly to his wheel, released his clutch, and with no more than a glance at the milky corduroy and his friends who now came baying down the hedge, was in a moment bearing Mr. Puddlebox and Mr. Wriford at immense speed towards wherever it was that his impatient gov'nor awaited him.

Mr. Wriford put his hands to his head and said, more to himself than to Mr. Puddlebox: "Well, this is the most extraordinary —"

Mr. Puddlebox settled his back against the seat, and cocking a very merry eye at Mr. Wriford, chanted with enormous fervour:

"O ye motors of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him for ever."

CHAPTER VIII

FIRST PERSON EXTRAORDINARY

"WELL — " said Mr. Wriford to himself.

There is to be added here, as bringing Mr. Wriford to this exclamation, that at midday the chauffeur, having whirled through rural England at great speed for some hours on end, again drew up at a roadside inn no less isolated than that at which he had first accommodated his passengers, and had no sooner repaired within than Mr. Puddlebox, first protruding a cautious head and finding no soul in sight, then led out the way through the further door and then up the road until a friendly hedgeside invited them to rest and to the various foods which Mr. Puddlebox had brought from the farm and now produced from his pockets.

Mr. Wriford ate in silence, and nothing that Mr. Puddlebox could say could fetch him from his thoughts. "Well," thought Mr. Wriford, "this is the most extraordinary state of affairs! A week ago I was an editor in London and afraid of everything and everybody. Now I've been in the river, and I've stolen a ride in a wagon, and I've had a devil of a fight with a wagoner, and I've kicked a policeman head over heels bang into a ditch, and I've nearly been burnt alive, and I've broken out through the roof of a barn and fallen a frightful buster off it, and I've slung a chap into a pond, and I've nearly killed a chap and half-

drowned him in milk, and I've nailed a man to the floor by his nightshirt, and I've jumped out of a high window and been chased for my life, and I've stolen a ride in a motor-car, and where the devil I am now I haven't the remotest idea. Well, it's the most extraordinary — !”

BOOK THREE

ONE OF THE FRIGHTENED ONES



100

BOOK THREE

ONE OF THE FRIGHTENED ONES

CHAPTER I

BODY WORK

I

It was in early May that Mr. Wriford cast himself into the river. Declining Summer, sullied in her raiment by September's hand, slain by October's, found him still in Mr. Puddlebox's company. But a different Wriford from him whom that jolly gentleman had first met upon the road from Barnet. In body a harder man, what of the open life, the mad adventures, and of the casual work — all manual work — in farm and field that supplied their necessities when these ran short. And harder man in soul. "You're a confirmed rascal, sir," addressed him the chairman of a Bench of country magistrates before whom — and not their first experience of such — he and Mr. Puddlebox once were haled, their offence that they had been found sleeping in the outbuildings of a rural parsonage.

The rector, a gentleman, appearing unwillingly to prosecute, pleaded for the prisoners. A trivial offence, he urged — a stormy night on which he would gladly

have given them shelter had they asked for it, and he turned to the dock with: "Why did you not come and ask for it, my friend?"

"Why, there'd have been no fun in doing that!" said Mr. Wriford.

"Fun!" exclaimed the rector. "No, no fun perhaps. But a hearty welcome I —"

"Oh, keep your hearty welcomes to yourself!" cried Mr. Wriford.

And then the chairman: "You're a confirmed rascal, sir. A confirmed and stubborn rascal. When our good vicar —"

"Well, you're a self-important, over-fed, and very gross-looking pomposity," returned Mr. Wriford.

"Seven days," said the chairman, very swollen. "Take them away, constable."

"Curse me," said Mr. Puddlebox when, accommodated for the night in adjoining cells, they conversed over the partition that divided them. "Curse me, you're no better than a fool, loony, and I challenge any man to be a bigger. Here we are at these vile tasks for a week and would have got away scot free and a shilling from the parson but for your fool's tongue."

"Well, I had to say something to stir them up," explained Mr. Wriford. "I must be doing something all the time, or I get —"

"Well, there's better things to do than this cursed foolishness," grumbled Mr. Puddlebox.

"It's new to me," said Mr. Wriford. "That's what I want."

That indeed was what he wanted in these months and ever sought with sudden bursts of fierceness or of irresponsible prankishness. He must be doing some-

thing all the time and doing something that brought reprisals, either in form of fatigue that followed hard work in their odd jobs — digging, carting stable refuse, hoeing a long patch of root crops, harvesting which gave the pair steady employment and left them at the turn of the year with a stock of shillings in hand, roadside work where labour had fallen short and a builder was behindhand with a contract for some cottages — or in form of punishment such as followed his truculence before the magistrate or was got by escapades of the nature of their early adventures.

Something that brought reprisals, something to be felt in his body. "Why, you don't understand, you see," Mr. Wriford would cry, responsive to remonstrance from Mr. Puddlebox. "All my life I've felt things here — here in my head," and he would strike his head hard and begin to speak loudly and very fiercely and quickly, so that often his words rolled themselves together or were several times repeated. "In my head, head, head — all mixed up and whirling there so I felt I must scream to let it all out: scream out senseless words and loud roars like uggranddlearrrrohhohgarragaragad-daurrr! Now my head's empty, empty, empty, and I can smash at it as if it didn't belong to me. Look here!"

"Ah, stop it, boy, stop it!" Mr. Puddlebox would cry, and catch at Mr. Wriford's fist that banged in illustration.

"Well, that's just to show you. Man alive, I've stood sometimes in my office with my head in such a whirling crash, and feeling so sick and frightened — that always went with it — that I've felt I must catch by the throat the next man who came in and kill him dead before he could speak to me. In my head, man, in my head —

felt things all my life in my head: and in my heart;” and Mr. Wriford would strike himself fiercely upon his breast. “Felt things in my heart so I was always in a torment and always tying myself up tighter and tighter and tighter — not doing this because I thought it was unkind to this person; and doing that because I thought I ought to do it for that person — messing, messing, messing round and spoiling my life with rotten sentiment and rotten ideas of rotten duty. God, when I think of the welter of it all! Now, my boy, it’s all over! My head’s as empty as an empty bucket and so’s my heart. I don’t care a curse for anybody or anything. I’m beginning to do what I ought to have done years ago — enjoy myself. It’s only my body now; I want to ache it and feel it and hurt it and keep it going all the time. If I don’t, if I stop going and going and going, I begin to think; and if I begin to think I begin to go back again. Then up I jump, my boy, and let fly at somebody again, or dig or whatever the work is, as if the devil was in me and until my body is ready to break, and then I say to my body: ‘Go on, you devil; go on. I’ll keep you at it till you drop. You’ve been getting soft and rotten while my head was working and driving me. Now it’s your turn. But you don’t drive me, my boy; I drive you. Get at it!’ That’s the way of it, Puddlebox. I’m free now, and I’m enjoying myself, and I want to go on doing new things and doing them hard, always and all the time. Now then!”

Mr. Puddlebox: “Sure you’re enjoying yourself, boy?”

“Why, of course I am. When it was all this cursed head and all worry I didn’t belong to myself. Now it’s all body, and I’m my own. I’ve missed something all

my life. Now I'm finding it. I'm finding what it is to be happy — it's not to care. That's the secret of it."

Mr. Puddlebox would shake his head. "That's not the secret of it, boy."

"What is, then?"

"Why, what I've told you: not to think so much about yourself."

"Well, that's just what I'm doing. I'm not caring a curse what happens to me."

"Yes, and thinking about that all the time. That's just where you're spooked, boy."

"Spooked!" Mr. Wriford would cry with an easy laugh. "That's seeing myself like I used to. I've not seen myself for weeks — months."

"But you're not unspooked yet, boy," Mr. Puddlebox would return.

II

They were come west in their tramping — set in that quarter by the motor-car that had run them from that early adventure with the nightshirted and the corduroyed gentlemen. It had alighted them in Wiltshire, and they continued, while splendid summer in imperial days and pageant nights attended them, by easy and haphazard stages down into Dorset and thence through Somerset and Devon into Cornwall by the sea.

Many amazements in these counties and in these months — some of a train with those afforded by the liver-cutting wagoner and by the yellow-toothed farmer bent upon arson; some quieter, but to Mr. Wriford, if he permitted thought, not less amazing — as when he found himself working with his hands and in his sweat

for manual wages; some in outrage of law and morals that had shocked the Mr. Wriford of the London days. He must be doing something, as he had told Mr. Puddlebox, and doing something all the time. What he did not tell was that these things — when they were wild, irresponsible, grotesque, wrong, immoral — were done by conscious effort before they were entered upon. Mr. Wriford used to — had to — dare himself to do them. “Now, here you are!” Mr. Wriford would say to himself when by freakish thought some opportunity offered itself. “Here you are! Ah, you funk it! I knew you would. I thought so. You funk it!” And then, thus taunted, would come the sudden burst of fierceness or of irresponsible prankishness, and Mr. Wriford would rush at the thing fiercely, and fiercely begin it, and with increasing fierceness carry it to settlement — one way or the other.

Once, up from a roadside to a labourer who came sturdily by, “I’ll fight you for tuppence!” cried Mr. Wriford, facing him. “Ba goom, I’ll faight thee for nowt!” said the man and knocked him down, and when again he rushed, furious and bleeding, smashed him again, and laughing at the ease of it, trod on his way.

“Well, why to the devil did you do such a mad thing?” said Mr. Puddlebox, awakened from a doze and tending Mr. Wriford’s hurts. “Where to the devil is the sense of such a thing?”

“I thought of it as he came along,” said Mr. Wriford, “and I had to do it.”

“Why, curse me,” cried Mr. Puddlebox, “I mustn’t even sleep for your madness, boy.”

“Well, I’ve done it,” Mr. Wriford returned, much hurt but fiercely glad. “I’ve done it, and I’m happy.

If I hadn't — oh, you wouldn't understand. That's enough. Let it bleed. Let the damned thing bleed. I like to see it."

He used to like to sit and count his bruises. He used to like, after hard work on some employment, to sit and reckon which muscles ached him most and then to spring up and exercise them so they ached anew. He used to like to sit and count over and over again the money that their casual labours earned him. These — bruises, and aches and shillings — were the indisputable testimony to his freedom, to the fact that he at last was doing things, to the reprisals against which he set his body and full earned. He used to like to go long periods without food. He used to like, when rain fell and Mr. Puddlebox sought shelter, to stand out in the soak of it and feel its soak. These — fastings and discomforts — were manifests that his body was suffering things, and that he was its master and his own.

Through all these excesses — checking him in many, from many dissuading him, in their results supporting him — Mr. Puddlebox stuck to him. That soft, fat, kindly and protective hand came often between him and self-invited violence from strangers by Mr. Puddlebox — when Mr. Wriford was not looking — tapping his head and accompanying the sign with nods and frowns in further illustration, or by more active rescues from his escapades. Chiefly Mr. Puddlebox employed his unfailing good-humour as deterrent of Mr. Wriford's fierceness. He learnt to let the starvation, or the exposure to the elements, or the engagement in some wild escapade, go to a certain pitch, then to argue with Mr. Wriford until he made him angry, then by some jovial whimsicality to bring him against his will to involun-

tary laughter; then Mr. Wriford would be pliable, consent to eat, to take shelter, to cease his folly. Much further than this Mr. Puddlebox carried the affection he had conceived for Mr. Wriford — and all it cost him. Once when lamentably far gone in his cups, he was startled out of their effects by becoming aware that Mr. Wriford was producing from his pockets articles that glistened beneath the moon where it lit the open-air resting-place to which he had no recollection of having come.

He stared amazed at two watches, a small clock, spoons, and some silver trinkets; and soon by further amazement was completely sobered. "I've done it," said Mr. Wriford, and in his eyes could be seen the gleam, and in his voice heard the nervous exaltation, that always went with accomplishment of any of his fiercenesses. "I've done it! It was a devil of a thing — right into two bedrooms — but I've done it."

Mr. Puddlebox in immense horror: "Done what?"

"Broken in there," and Mr. Wriford jerked back his head in "there's" indication, and Mr. Puddlebox, to his new and frantic alarm, found that a large house stood within fifty paces of them, they in its garden.

"Why, you're — hup!" — cried Mr. Puddlebox — "Blink! Why, what to the devil do you mean — broken in there? What are we, — hup, blink! — doing here?"

"Why, we had a bet," said Mr. Wriford, looking over his prizes and clearly much pleased with himself. "I bet you as we came down the road that I'd break in here before you would. I took the front and you went to the back, but you've been asleep."

"Asleep!" cried Mr. Puddlebox. "I've been drunk. I was drunk." He got on his knees from where he sat

and with a furious action fumbled in his coat-tails. From them his bottle of whisky, and Mr. Puddlebox furiously wrenched the cork and hurled the bottle from him. "To hell with it!" cried Mr. Puddlebox as it lay gurgling. "Hell take it. I'll not touch it again. Why, loony — why, you staring, hup! hell! mad loony, if you'd been caught you'd have gone to convict prison, boy. And my fault for this cursed drink. Give me those things. Give them to me and get out of here — get up the road."

"Let 'em alone!" said Mr. Wriford menacingly. "What d'you want with 'em?"

Mr. Puddlebox played the game learnt of experience. He concealed his agitation. He said with his jolly smile: "Why, mean that I will not be beat at anything by you or by any man. I will challenge you or any man at any game and will be beat by none. You've been in and got 'em, boy; now, curse me, I will equal you and beat you for that I will go in and put them back. Play fair, boy. Hand over."

"Well, there you are," said Mr. Wriford, disarmed and much tickled.

"Out you go then, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox, gathering up the trinkets. "Out into the road. You had none of me to interfere with you, and I must have none of you while I go my own way to this."

Mr. Puddlebox took Mr. Wriford to the gate of the grounds, then went back again in much trembling. An open window informed him of Mr. Wriford's place of entry. He leant through to a sofa that stood handy, there deposited the trinkets, and very softly shut the window down. When he rejoined Mr. Wriford, fear's perspiration was streaming from him. "I've had a

squeak of it," said Mr. Puddlebox with simulated cheeriness. "Let's out of this, and I'll tell you."

He walked Mr. Wriford long, quickly and far. While he walked he fought again the battle that had been swift victory when he cast his bottle from him; and in future days fought it again and met new tortures in each fight.

"Aren't you going to get any whisky?" asked Mr. Wriford when on a day, pockets lined with harvest money, he noticed Mr. Puddlebox's abstinence.

"Whisky! Hell take such stinking stuff," cried Mr. Puddlebox and sucked in his cheeks — and groaned; then put a hand in his tail-pocket and felt a hard lump rolled in a cloth that lay where the whisky used to lie and said to himself: "Two bottles — two bottles."

It was Mr. Puddlebox's promise to himself, and his lustiest weapon in his battles with his desire, that, on some day that must come somehow, the day when he should be relieved of his charge of Mr. Wriford, he would buy himself two bottles of whisky and sit himself down and drink them. Into the hard lump rolled in the cloth, and composing it, there went daily when his earnings permitted it two coppers. When that sum reached eighty-four — two at three-and-six apiece — his two bottles would be ready for the mere asking.

Wherefore "Two bottles! Two bottles!" Mr. Puddlebox would assure himself when most fiercely his cravings assailed him, and against the pangs of his denial would combine luxurious thoughts of when they should thus be slaked and fears of what might happen to his loony if he now gave way to them.

Much those fears — or the affection whence they rose

— cost him in these later days: swiftly their end approached. Much and more as summer passed and autumn came sombrely and chill: swiftly their end as sombre day succeeded sombre day, and they passed down into Cornwall and went along the sombre sea. Village to village, through nature in decay that grey sky shrouded, grey sea dirged: Mr. Puddlebox ever for tarrying when larger town was reached, Mr. Wriford ever for onward — onward, on.

CHAPTER II

CROSS WORK

EVER for onward, Mr. Wriford — onward, onward, on!

Where, in the bright days, Mr. Puddlebox had taken the lead and suggested their road and programme, now, in the sombre days, chill in the air, and in the wind a bluster, Mr. Wriford led. He chose the roughest paths. He most preferred the cliff tracks where wind and rain drove strongest, or down upon the shingle where walking was mostly climbing the great boulders that ran from cliff to sea. He walked with head up as though to show the weather how he scorned it. He walked very fast as though there was something he pursued.

Mr. Puddlebox did not like it at all. Much of Mr. Puddlebox's jolly humour was shaken out of him in these rough and arduous scrambles, and he grumbled loud and frequent. But very fond of his loony, Mr. Puddlebox, and increasingly anxious for him in this fiercer mood of his.

There are limits, though: and these came on an afternoon wild and wet when Mr. Wriford exchanged the cliff road for the shore and pressed his way at his relentless pace along a desolate stretch cut into frequent inlets by rocky barriers that must be toilsomely climbed, a dun sea roaring at them.

"Why, what to the devil is it you're chasing, boy?"

Mr. Puddlebox's grumbings at last broke out, when yet another barrier surmounted revealed another and a steeper little beyond. "Here's a warm town we've left," cried Mr. Puddlebox, sinking upon a great stone, "and here's as wet, cold, and infernal a climbing as I challenge you or any man ever to have seen. Here's you been dragging and trailing and ripe for anything these three months and more, and now rushing and stopping for nothing so I challenge the devil himself to keep up with you."

"Well, don't keep up!" said Mr. Wriford fiercely. "Who wants you to?"

Mr. Puddlebox blinked at that; but he answered stoutly: "Well, curse me if I do, for one."

"Nor me for another," said Mr. Wriford and turned where he stood and pressed on across the shingle towards the next rocky arm.

Mr. Puddlebox sucked in his cheeks, felt at the hard lump in his pocket, then followed at a little run, and caught Mr. Wriford as Mr. Wriford climbed the further barrier of rocks.

"Hey, give us a hand, boy," cried Mr. Puddlebox cheerfully. "This is a steep one."

Mr. Wriford looked down. "What, are you coming on? I thought you'd stopped."

"You're unkind, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox.

Mr. Wriford, looking down, this time saw the blink that went with the words. He jumped back lower, coming with reckless bounds. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. Look here, coming across this bit" — he pointed back to their earlier stopping-place — "I felt — I felt *rotten* to think you'd gone."

"Why, that's my loony!" cried Mr. Puddlebox,

highly pleased. "Come down here, boy. Let's talk of this business."

"But I wouldn't look back," said Mr. Wriford, "or come back. I've done with that sort of thing."

"Why, so you have," said Mr. Puddlebox, rightly guessing to what Mr. Wriford referred. "You can come down now, though, for I'm asking you to, so there's no weakness in that. There's shelter here."

"I don't want shelter," said Mr. Wriford, and went a step higher and stood with head and back erect where gale and rain caught him more full.

Mr. Puddlebox summoned much impressiveness into his voice. "Boy," said Mr. Puddlebox, "this is a fool's game, and I never saw such even with you. Bring sense to it, boy. Tramping is well enough for fine days: winters for towns. There's money to be found in towns, boy; and if no money, workhouse is none so bad, and when we've tried it you've liked it and called it something new, which is what you want. Well, there's nothing new this way, boy. There's no work and there's no bed in the fields winter-time. Nothing new this way, boy."

A fiercer drive of wind spun Mr. Wriford where he stood exposed. He caught at a rock with his hands and laughed grimly, then stood erect again, and pressed himself against the rising gale.

"Ah, isn't there, though?" he cried. "Man, there's cold and rain and wind, and there's tramping on and on against it and feeling you don't care a damn for it."

"Well, curse me, but I do," returned Mr. Puddlebox. "It's just what I do mind, and there's no sense to it, boy. There's no sense to it."

"There is for me," Mr. Wriford cried. "It's what I want!" He turned from fronting the gale. Mr. Puddlebox saw him measuring with his eye the height where he stood from the ground, and called in swift alarm: "Don't jump! You'll break your legs. Don't —"

Mr. Wriford laughed aloud, jumped and came crashing to his hands and knees, got up and laughed again. "That's all right!" said he.

"Boy, that's all wrong," said Mr. Puddlebox very seriously. "That's all of a part with your rushing along as if it was the devil himself you chased; and what to the devil else it can be I challenge you to say or any man."

Mr. Wriford took up the words he had cried down from the top of the barrier. "It's what I want," he told Mr. Puddlebox. "Cold and not minding it, and fighting against the wind and not minding it, and getting wet and going on full speed however rough the road and not minding that. Cold and wind and rain and sticking to it and fighting it and beating it and liking it — ah!" and he threw up his arms, extending them, and filled his chest with a great breath, as though he embraced and drunk deep of the elements that he stuck to and fought and beat.

Mr. Puddlebox looked at him closely. "Sure you're liking it?" he asked, his tone the same as when he often inquired: "Sure you're happy, boy?"

"Sure! Why, of course I'm sure. Why, all the time I'm thrashing along, do you know what I'm saying? I'm saying: 'Beating you! Beating you! Beating you!' and at night I lie awake and think of it all waiting outside for me and how I shall beat it, beat it, beat it again when morning comes."

"Sit down," said Mr. Puddlebox. "I've something to say to you."

"No, I'll stand," said Mr. Wriford.

"Aren't you tired?"

"I'm fit to drop," said Mr. Wriford; and then with a hard face: "But sitting down is giving way to it. I'll not do that. No, by God, I'll beat it all the time."

Then Mr. Puddlebox broke out in exasperation and struck his stick upon the shingle to mark it. "Why, curse me if I ever heard such a thing or knew such a thing!" cried Mr. Puddlebox. "Beating it! I've told you a score time, and this time I give it to you hot, that when you go so, you're spooked, spooked to hell and never will be unspooked! 'Beating it, beating it, beating it!' you cry as you rush along! Why, it's then that it is beating you all the time, for it is of yourself that you are thinking. And that's what's wrong with you, thinking of yourself, and has always been. And there's no being happy that way and never will be. Think of some one else, boy. For God Almighty's sake think of some one else or you're beat and mad for sure!"

Mr. Wriford gave him back his fierceness. "Think of some one else! That's what I've done all my life. That's what locked me up and did for me. I've done with all that now, and I'm happy. Think of some one else! God!" cried he and snapped his fingers. "I don't care that for anybody. Whom should I think of?"

"Well, try a thought for me," cried Mr. Puddlebox, relenting nothing of his own heat. "I've watched you these four months. I've got you out of trouble. Curse me, I've fed you and handled you like a baby. But for me you'd like be lying dead somewhere."

"Well, who cares?" cried Mr. Wriford. "Not me, I don't."

"Ah, and you'd liker still be clapped in an asylum and locked there all your days; you'd mind that. But for me that's where you'd be and where you'll go, if I left you to-morrow."

Mr. Wriford cried with a black and angry face: "Well, if it's true, who asked you to hang on to me? Why have you done it? If it's true, mind you! For I've done my share. You've admitted that yourself. In the rows we've got into I've done my share, and in the work we've done I've done more than my share, once I've learnt the hang of it. Now then! That's true, isn't it? If you've done so jolly much, why have you? There's one for you. Why?"

His violent storming put a new mood to Mr. Puddlebox's face. Not the exasperation with which he had burst out and continued till now. That left him. Not the jolly grin with which commonly he regarded life in general and Mr. Wriford in particular. None of these. A new mood. The mood and hue Mr. Wriford had glimpsed when, looking down from the barrier as Mr. Puddlebox overtook him, and crying down to him: "I thought you'd stopped," he had seen Mr. Puddlebox blink and heard him say: "You're unkind, boy." Now he saw it again — and was again to see it before approaching night gave way to following morn.

Mr. Puddlebox blinked and went redly cloudy in the face. "Why?" said he. "Well, I'll tell you why, boy. Because I like you. I liked you, boy, when you came wretched up the Barnet road and thought there was one with you, following you. I liked you then for you were glad of my food and my help and caught at my

hand as night fell and held it while you slept. Curse me, I liked you then, for, curse me, you were the first come my way in many years of sin that thought me stronger than himself and that I could be stronger to and could help. I liked you then, boy, and I've liked you more each sun and moon since. I've lost a precious lot in life through being what, curse me, I am. None ever to welcome me, none ever to be glad of me, none ever that minded if I rode by on my legs or went legs first in a coffin cart. Then came you that was loony, that was glad of me here and glad of me there, that asked me this and asked me that, that laughed with me and ate with me and slept with me, that because you was loony was weaker than me. So I liked you, boy; curse me, I loved you, boy. There's why for you."

This long speech, delivered with much blinking and redness of the face, was listened to by Mr. Wriford with the fierceness gone out of his eyes but with his face twisting and working as though what he heard put him in difficulty. In difficulty and with difficulty he then broke out. "God knows I'm grateful," Mr. Wriford said, his voice strained as his face. "But look at this — I don't want to be grateful. I don't want that kind of thing. I've been through all that. 'Thank you' for this; and 'Thank you' for that; and 'I beg your pardon;' and 'Oh, how kind of you.' Man, man!" cried Mr. Wriford, striking his hands to his face and tearing them away again as though scenes were before his eyes that he would wrench away. "Man, I've done that thirty years and been killed of it. I don't want ever to think that kind of stuff again. I want just to keep going on and having nothing touch me except what hurts me here in my body and not care a damn for it —

which I don't. You're always asking me if I'm happy, and I know you think I'm not. But I am. Look how hard my hands are: that makes me happy just to think of that. And how I don't mind getting wet or cold: that makes me happy, so happy that I shout out with the gladness of it and get myself wetter. It's being a man. It's getting the better of myself. You're going to say it's not. But you don't understand. One man has to get the better of himself one way and one another. With me it's getting the better of being afraid of things. Well, I'm beating it. I'm beating it when I'm out here, tramping along. But when I'm sheltering it's beating me. When you tell me — " He stopped, and stooping to Mr. Puddlebox took his hands and squeezed them so that the water was squeezed to Mr. Puddlebox's eyes. "There!" cried Mr. Wriford. "Grateful! I'm more grateful to you. I'm fonder of you than any man I've ever met. But don't tell me you're fond of me. I don't want that from anybody. When you tell me that it puts me back to what I used to be. I'm grateful. Believe that; but don't make me talk about it."

"I never did want you to," said Mr. Puddlebox. "Look here, boy. Look how we begun on this talk. I told you to think of some one else, care for some one else, and you broke out 'whom were you to care for?' and I gave you, being cold and wet and mortal tired, I gave you 'For God Almighty's sake care for me' and then told you why you should. Well, let's get back to that. Care for me. Look here, boy. We were ten mile to the next village along this devil of a place when we left the town. I reckon we've come four, and here's evening upon us and six to go. Well, I can't go them,

and that's the end and the beginning of it. I'm for going back where there's a bed to be had and while yet it is to be had, for they sleep early these parts. Wherefore when I say 'for God Almighty's sake care for me,' I mean stop this chasing this way and let's chase back the way we come. We'll forget what's gone between us," concluded Mr. Puddlebox, reverting to his jolly smiles and getting to his feet, "and I'll hate you and you'll hate me, since that pleases you most, and back we'll get and have a dish of potatoes inside of us and a warm bed outside. Wherefore I say:

"O ye food and warmth, bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him for ever."

Mr. Wriford laughed, and Mr. Puddlebox guessed him persuaded once again. But he set his face then and shook his head sharply, and Mr. Puddlebox saw him determined. "No," said Mr. Wriford. "No, I'm not going back. I'm never going back. If you want to know what I'm going to do, I'm going to stay the night out here."

Mr. Puddlebox cried: "Out here! Now what to the devil —"

"I'd settled it," Mr. Wriford interrupted him. "I'd settled it when I thought you'd gone back. There're little caves all along here — I saw one the other side of these rocks. I'm going to sleep in one. I'd made up my mind when you caught up with me. I'm going to do it."

Mr. Puddlebox stared at him, incapable of speech. Then cried: "Wet as you are?"

"Wet as I am," said Mr. Wriford and laughed.

"Cold as it is and going to be colder?"

"Cold as it is and the colder the better."

"You'll stay alone," cried Mr. Puddlebox. "Curse me if I'll stay with you."

"You needn't," said Mr. Wriford. "I'm not asking you to."

"But you think I'm going to," cried Mr. Puddlebox. "And you're wrong, for I'm not. I'm going straight back, and I'm going at once, the quicker to fetch you to your senses. I'm going, boy;" and in advertisement of his intention Mr. Puddlebox began resolutely to move away.

Mr. Wriford as resolutely turned to the barrier of rocks and began to climb.

"Come on, boy," called Mr. Puddlebox.

Mr. Wriford called back: "No. No, I'm going to stay. I'm going to see the night through."

"You'll know where to find me," cried Mr. Puddlebox. "I'll be where we lay last night."

Mr. Wriford's laugh came to him through the gathering gloom, and through the gloom he saw Mr. Wriford's form midway up the rocks. "And you'll know where to find me," Mr. Wriford called.

Mr. Puddlebox paused irresolutely and cursed roundly where he paused. Then turned and stamped away across the shingle. When he reached the rocky arm where first they had quarrelled he stopped again and again looked back. Mr. Wriford was not to be seen.

"That'll go near to kill him if he stays," said Mr. Puddlebox. "And, curse me, if I go back to him he will stay. I'll push on, and he'll follow me. That's the only way to it."

They had spent the previous night in an eating-house where "Beds for Single Men — 4d." attracted wanderers. It was seven o'clock when Mr. Puddlebox's

slow progression — halting at every few yards and looking back — at length returned him to it. He dried and warmed himself before the fire in the kitchen that was free to inmates of the house.

"Where's your mate?" asked the proprietor. "Thought you was making Port Rannock?"

"Too far," said Mr. Puddlebox; and to the earlier question: "He's behind me. I'll wait my supper till he comes."

He waited, though very hungry. Every time the door of the kitchen opened he turned eagerly in expectation that was every time denied. Towards nine he gave up the comfortable seat he had secured before the blaze and sat himself where he could watch the door. It never admitted Mr. Wriford.

"What's the night?" he asked a seafaring newcomer.

"Blowing up," the man told him. "Blowing up dirty."

Mr. Puddlebox went from the room and from the house, shivered as the night air struck him, and then down the cobbled street. Ten o'clock, borne gustily upon the wind, came to him from the church tower as he turned along the shore.

None saw him go: and he was not to return.

CHAPTER III

WATER THAT TAKES YOUR BREATH

MR. PUDDLEBOX'S landsman's eye showed him no signs of that "blowing up dirty" of which he had been informed. A fresh breeze faced him as he walked and somewhat hindered his progress; but a strong moon rode high and lighted him; the sea, much advanced since he came that way, broke quietly along the shore. "Why, it's none so bad a night to be out," thought Mr. Puddlebox; and there began to change within him the mood in which he had left the lodging-house. Seated there he had imagined a rough night, wet and dark, and with each passing hour had the more reproached himself for his desertion of his loony. Now that he found night clear and still, well-lit and nothing overcold, he inclined towards considering himself a fool for his pains.

An hour on his road brought change of mood again. The very stillness, the very clearness that first had reassured him, now began to frighten him. He began to apprehend as it were a something sinister in the quietude. He began to dislike the persistent regularity of his footsteps grinding in the deep shingle and to dislike yet more the persistent regularity of the breaking waves. They rose about knee-high as he watched them, fell and pressed whitely up the beach, back slowly, as though reluctant and with deep protest of the stones,

then massed knee-high and down and up again. Darkly on his right hand the steep cliffs towered.

The monotony of sound oppressed him. He began to have an eerie feeling as though he were being followed, and once or twice he looked back. No, very much alone. Then his footsteps, whose persistent regularity had wrought upon his senses, began to trouble him with their noisiness upon the shingle. He tried to walk less heavily and presently found himself picking his way, and that added to the eeriness, startling him when the loose stones yielded and he stumbled.

He approached that quarter where the shore began to be divided by the rocky barriers that ran from cliff to sea. Then he apprehended what, as he expressed it to himself, was the matter with the sea. It was very full. It looked very deep. What had seemed to him to be waves rolling up now appeared to him as a kind of overflowing, as though not spurned-out waves, but the whole volume of the water welled, swelled, to find more room. The breaking sound was now scarcely to be heard, and that intensified the stillness, and that frightened him more. He began to run. . . .

Mr. Puddlebox stopped running for want of breath; but that physical admission of the mounting panic within him left him very frightened indeed. He went close to the cliffs. Darker there and very *shut-up* the way they towered so straight and so high. He came away from them, his senses worse wrought upon. Then he came to the first of the rocky barriers that ran like piers from the cliff to the sea, and then for the first time noticed how high the tide had risen. When he came here with Mr. Wriford they had done their climbing far from the cliff's base. Now the barrier was in great

part submerged. He must climb it near to the cliff where climbing was steeper and more difficult. Well, there was sand between these barriers, that was one good thing. Walking would be easier and none of that cursed noise that his feet made on the shingle. With much difficulty he got up and looked down upon the other side. . . .

There wasn't any sand. Water where sand had been — water that with that welling, swelling motion pressed about the shingle that banked beneath the cliff.

Mr. Puddlebox said aloud, in a whisper: "The tide!" It was the first time since he had started out that he had thought of it. He looked along the cliff. From where he stood, from where these rocky piers began, the cliff, as he saw, began to stand outwards in a long bluff. The further one went, the further the tide would. . . . He carried his eyes a little to sea. Beneath the moon were white, uneasy lines. That was where the sea swirled upon the barriers. He looked downwards and saw the placid water welling, swelling beneath his feet.

"The tide," said Mr. Puddlebox again, again in a whisper. He swallowed something that rose in his throat. He ran his tongue around his lips, for they were dry. He shivered, for the perspiration his long walk had induced now seemed to be running down his body in very cold drops. He looked straight above him and at once down to his feet again and moved his feet in steadying of his balance: a sense of giddiness came from looking up that towering height that towered so steeply as to appear hanging over him. He looked along the way he had come; and he stood so close to the cliff-face, and it bulked so enormously before him, that

the bay he had traversed seemed, by contrast, to sweep back immensely far — immensely safe.

Mr. Puddlebox watched that safety with unmoving eyes as though he were fascinated by it. The longer he watched the more it seemed to draw him. He kept his eyes upon one distant spot, half way along the bay and high up the shore, and his hypnotic state presented him to himself sitting there — safe. Still with his eyes upon it he moved across the narrow pier in its direction and sat down, legs dangling towards the bay, in the first action of descending. He twisted about to pursue the action, for he was a timid and unhandy climber who would climb downwards facing his hold. As he came to his hands and knees he went forward on them and looked across the fifty yards of shingle-bank, the sea close up, that separated him from the next pier of rocks. He was a creature of fear as he knelt there — a very figure of very ugly fear, ungainly in his form that hung bulkily between his arms and legs, white and loosely fat in his face that peered timorously over the edge, cowardly and useless in his crouching, shrinking pose.

He said aloud, his eyes on the distant barrier: "I'm as safe there — for a peep — as I am here. I can get back. Even if I get wet I can get back."

He shuffled forward and this time put his legs over the other side and sat a while. Here the drop was not more than three feet beneath the soles of his boots as they dangled. He drew them up. "If he's safe, he's safe," said Mr. Puddlebox. "And if he's drowned, he's drowned. Where's the sense of —"

Something that floated in the water caught his eye. A little, round, greyish clump. About the size of a face.

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Floating close to the shore. Not a face. A clump of fishing-net corks that Mr. Puddlebox remembered to have seen dry upon the sand when first he arrived here. But very like, very dreadfully like a face, and the water rippling very dreadfully over it at each pulsing of the tide. Floated his loony's face somewhere like that? Struggled he somewhere near to shore as that? The ripples awash upon his mouth? His eyes staring? Mouth that had laughed with Mr. Puddlebox these several months? Eyes that often in appeal had sought his own, and that he loved to light from fear to peace, to trust, to confidence, to merriment? Floated he somewhere? Struggled he somewhere? Waited he somewhere for these hands which, when he sometimes caught, proved them at last of use to some one, stronger than some one else's in many years of sin?

Mr. Puddlebox slid to the shingle and ran along it; came to the further barrier and got upon it; stood there in fear. Beyond, and to the next pier, there was no more, between sea and cliff, than room to walk.

His lips had been very dry when, a short space before, looking towards where now he stood, he had run his tongue around them. They were moist then to what, licking them again, his tongue now felt. Cold the sweat then that trickled down his body: warm to what icy stream fear now exuded on his flesh. He had shivered then: now he not shivered but in all his frame shook so that his knees scarcely could support him. Then it was merely safety that he desired: now he realised fear. Then only safety occupied his mind: now cowardice within him, and he knew it. Love, strangely, strongly conceived in these months, called him on: fear, like a live thing on the rock before him, held him,

pressed him back. He thought of rippling water awash upon that mouth, and looked along the narrow path before him, and licked his arid lips again: he saw himself with that deep water, that icy water, that *thick* water, welling, swelling, to his knees, to his waist, to his neck, sucking him adrift — *ah!* and he looked back whence he had come and ran his tongue again about his ugly, hanging mouth.

"I'm a coward," said Mr. Puddlebox aloud. "I can't come to you, boy," he said. "I've got to go back, boy," he said. "I can't stand the water, boy. I've always been terrified of deep water, boy. I'd come to you through fire, boy; by God, I would. Not through water. I'm a coward. I can't help it, boy. Water takes your breath. I can't do it, boy."

He waited as if he thought an answer would come. There was only an intense stillness. There was only the very tiniest lapping of the water as it welled and swelled: sometimes there was the faint rattle of a stone that the sucking water sucked from the little ridge of pebbles against the cliff.

Mr. Puddlebox looked down upon the water and spoke to it. The words he spoke might have been employed fiercely, but he spoke them scarcely above a whisper as though it were a confidence that he invited of the sea. "Why don't you break and roar?" said Mr. Puddlebox to the sea, bending down to it. "Why don't you break and roar in waves with foam? You'd be more like fire then. There'd be something in you then. It's the dead look of you. It's the thick look of you. Why don't you break and roar? It's the swelling up from under of you. It's the sucking of you. Why don't you break and roar?"

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No answer to that. Only the aching stillness. Only the very tiniest, tiniest lapping of the water as it welled and swelled: sometimes the tiny rattle of a stone that from the ridge against the cliff the sucking water sucked.

In that silence Mr. Puddlebox continued to stare at the water. He stared at it; and at its silence, and as he stared, and as silent, motionless, he continued to stare, his face began to work as, in the presence of a sleeper, sudden stealthy resolve might come to one that watched. Then he began to act as though the water were in fact asleep. He looked all round, then he stepped swiftly down to the little ridge. The pebbles gave beneath him and carried his left foot into the water. He stood perfectly still, pressed against the cliff. "Why don't you break and roar?" whispered Mr. Puddlebox. No answer. No sound. He began to tread very cautiously towards the further pier, the palms of his hands against the cliff, and his face anxiously towards the sea, and all his action as though he moved in stealth and thought to give the sea the slip. As he neared the barrier, so neared the cliff the sea. When but twenty yards remained to be traversed the cliff began to thrust a buttress seaward, awash along its base. "Water takes your breath," Mr. Puddlebox had said. A dozen steps took him above his boots, and he began to catch at his breath as the chill struck him. He opened his mouth with the intent to make these sobbing inspirations less noisy than if drawn hissing through his teeth. He slid his feet as if to lift and splash them would risk awakening the sleeping tide. He was to his knees in it when he reached the rocks. Their surface was green in slimy weed: that meant the tide would cover them. He got up, and on his hands

and knees upon the slime caught at his breath and peered beyond.

No beach was visible here: only water: perfectly still.

It was a very short way to the next barrier, and of the barrier very short what was to be seen. The buttress of the cliff pressed steadily out to what was no more than a little table of rock, scarcely thicker above the surface than the thickness of a table-top, then seemed to fall away. A trifle beyond the table there upstood a detached pile of rock, rather like a pulpit and standing about a pulpit's height above the water. That table — when it ran far out along the shore — was where Mr. Puddlebox, looking back, had last seen his loony stand. He remembered it, for he remembered the summit of the pulpit rock that peered above it.

The idea to shout occurred to him. That low table seemed to mark a corner. His loony might be beyond it. If he shouted — He did not dare to shout. Here, more than before, the intensity of the silence possessed him. He did not dare to break it. Here, with no beach visible, the water seemed profoundly dead in slumber.

"Why don't you break and roar?" said Mr. Puddlebox. "Why don't you —" he held his breath and crept forward. He lowered himself and caught his breath. His feet crunched upon the shingle bed, the water stood above his knees, and while the stones still moved where he had disturbed them he stood perfectly still. When they had settled he began to move, sideways, very slowly, his back against the cliff. Each side-long step took him deeper; at each he more sharply caught his breath. It seemed to him as though the cliff were actually pressing him forward with huge hands.

He pressed against it with all his force as though to hold it back. It thrust him, thrust him, thrust him. He was deep to his thighs. He was deep to his waist. "Water takes your breath," Mr. Puddlebox had said. At each deepening step more violently his breath seemed to be taken, more clutchingly had to be recalled. He was above his waist. He stumbled and gave a cry and recovered himself and began to go back; tried to control his dreadful breathing; came on again; then again retreated. Now his breathing that had been sobbing gasps became sheer sobs. He suddenly turned from his sidelong progress, went backwards in two splashing strides whence he had come — in three, in four, and then in a panic headlong rush, and as if he were pursued clambered frantically out again upon the slimy rocks.

As if he were pursued — and now, as if to sight the pursuit, looked sobbing back upon the water he had churned. There was scarcely a sign of his churning. Scarcely a mark of his track. Still as before the water lay there. Still, and thick, and silent, and asleep, and seemed to mock his fears.

"Blast you!" cried Mr. Puddlebox, responsive to the silent mock. "Blast you, why don't you break and roar?" He put a foot down to it and glared at the water. "Why in hell don't you break and roar?" cried Mr. Puddlebox, and flung himself in again, and splashed to the point at which he had turned and fled, and drew a deep breath and went forward above his waist. . . .

The cliff thrust him out and he was deeper; thrust again, and he was above his waist. "Takes your breath" — he was catching at his breath in immense spasms. The shore dropped beneath his feet and he was

to his armpits, the table of rock a long pace away. He was drawn from the cliff, and he screamed in dreadful fear. He tried to go back and floundered deeper. He was drowning, he knew. If he lost his footing — and he was losing it — he would go down, and if he went down he never would rise again. He called aloud on God and screamed aloud in wordless terror. The tide swung him against the cliff, and drew him screaming and clutching along it. He stumbled and knew himself gone. His hands struck the table of rock. He clutched, found his feet, sprang frantically, and drew himself upon it. He lay there exhausted and moaning. When his abject mind was able to give words to his moans, "O my Christ, don't let me drown," he said. "Not after that, Christ, don't let me drown. O merciful Christ, not after that."

After a little he opened his eyes that had been shut in bewilderment of blind terror and in preparation of death and that he had not courage or thought to open. He opened his eyes. This is what he saw.

Beneath his chin, as he lay, the still, deep water. Close upon his right hand the cliff that towered upwards to the night. A narrow channel away from him stood the pulpit rock. The cliff ran sharply back from beside him, then thrust again towards the pulpit; stopped short of it and then pressed onwards out to sea. Its backward dip formed a tiny inlet over which, masking it from the open sea, the pulpit rock stood sentinel. The back of the inlet showed at its centre a small cave that had the appearance of a human mouth, open. At low water this mouth would have stood a tall man's height above the beach. A short ridge ran along its upper lip. In the dim light it showed there blackly

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like a little clump of moustache. From its under lip, forming a narrow slipway of beach up to it, there ran a rubble of stones as if the mouth had emitted them or as if its tongue depended into the sea. The corners of the mouth drooped, and here, as if they slobbered, the water trickled in and out responsive to the heaving of the tide.

Mr. Wriford lay upon this slip. He lay face downwards. His arms from his elbows were extended within the mouth of the cave. His boots were in the water. His legs, as Mr. Puddlebox thought, lay oddly twisted.

CHAPTER IV

WATER THAT SWELLS AND SUCKS

WHO is so vile a coward that one weaker than himself, in worse distress, shall not arrest his cowardice? Who that has given love so lost in fear as not to love anew, amain, when out of peril his love is called? Who so base then not to lose in gladness what held his soul in dread?

First Mr. Puddlebox only stared. Water that takes your breath had taken his. Water that takes your breath rose in a thin film over the rock where on his face he lay, passed beneath his body, chilled him anew, and took his breath again. He watched it ooze from under him and spread before him: lip upwards where he faced it and ooze beneath his hands. Then gave his eyes again towards the cave.

Who is so vile a coward? Mr. Puddlebox's teeth chattered with his body's frozen chill: worse, worse, with terror of what he had escaped — God, when that sucking water sucked! — fast, faster with that worse horror he besought heaven "not after that" should overtake him. Who so vile, so base? Ah, then that piteous thing that lay before his eyes! in shape so odd, so ugly — broken? dead? Whom he had seen so wild, so eager? who child had been to him and treated as a child? Who first and only in all these years of sin had looked to him for aid, for counsel, strength? Who must have fought this

filthy, cruel, silent, sucking water, and fighting it have called him, wanted him? Ah!

Who is so vile? "Loony," Mr. Puddlebox whispered. "Loony! Hey, boy!"

He only whispered. He did not dare a cry that should demand an answer — and demanding, no answer bring. "Hey, boy! Loony!" He tried to raise his voice. He dared not raise it. Anew and thicker now the water filmed the rock about him. Here was death: well, there was death — that piteous thing. . . .

Then change! Then out of death life! Then gladness out of dread! Then joy's tumult as one beside a form beneath a sheet should see the dead loved move.

About the slipway, as he watched, he saw the swelling water, as if with sudden impulse, swell over Mr. Wri-ford's boots, run to his knees, and in response the prone figure move — the shoulders raise as if to drag the body: raise very feebly and very feebly drop as if the oddly twisted legs were chained.

Feebly — ah, but in sign of life! Revulsion from fear to gladness brought Mr. Puddlebox scrambling to his feet and upright upon them. To a loud cry there would be answer then! Loudly he challenged it. "Loony!" cried Mr. Puddlebox, his voice athrill. "Hey, boy, what's wrong? I'm coming to you, boy!"

It was a groan that answered him.

"Are you hurt, boy?"

There answered him: "Oh, for God's sake — oh, for God's sake!"

"Why, that's my loony!" cried Mr. Puddlebox in a very loud voice. "Hold on, boy! I'm coming to you!"

Excitedly, in excited gladness his terrors bound up, quickly as he could, catching at his breath as his fears

caught him, stifling them in jolly shouts of: "Hold on for me, boy! Why, here I come, boy, this very minute!" he started to make his way, excitedly pursued it.

"Hold on for me, boy!" The cliff along the wall of the inlet against which he stood shelved downwards into the dark, still sea. "Here I come, boy!" He went on his face on the table rock and with his legs felt in the water beneath him and behind him. "Hold on for me, boy!" His feet found a ridge, and he lowered himself to it and began to feel his way along it, his hands against the cliff, above his waist the still, dark sea. "Here I come, boy! This very minute!"

So he cried: so he came — deeper, and now his perils rose to fight what brought him on. Deeper — the water took his breath. "Here I come, boy!" Stumbled — thought himself gone, knew as it were an icy hand thrust in his vitals from the depths, clutching his very heart. "I'm to you now, boy. Here —" Terror burst in a cry to his mouth. He changed it to "Whoa!" He was brought by the ridge on which he walked to a point opposite what of the slipway before the cave stood dry. The ridge ended abruptly. He had almost gone beyond it, almost slipped and gone, almost screamed.

"Whoa!" said Mr. Puddlebox. "Hold on for me, boy!" He took his hands from the cliff and faced about where Mr. Wriford lay. Shaken, he felt his way lower. God, again! Again his foothold terminated! Abruptly he could feel his way no more. Like a hand, like a hand at his throat, the water caught his breath. "Hold on for me, boy!" His voice was thick. "Hold on for me, boy!" Clear again, but he stood, stood, and where he stood the water swayed him. Here the cliff base seemed

to drop. Here the depths waited him. Facing his feet he knew must be the wall of the slipway. No more than a long stride — ah, no more! If he launched himself and threw himself, his foot must strike it, his arms come upon its surface where that figure lay. Only a long stride. What, when he made it, if no foothold offered? What if he missed, clutched, fell? He looked across the narrow space. Only that spring's distance that figure lay, its face turned from him. He listened. The silence ached, tingled all about him. Suddenly it gave him from the figure the sound of breathing that came and went in moans.

Who is so vile a coward? Swiftly Mr. Puddlebox crouched, nerved, braced himself to spring. Ah, swifter thrust his mind, and bright as flame and fierce as flame, as a flame shouting, flamed flaming vision before his starting eyes. He saw himself leap. He saw himself clutch, falling — God, he could feel his finger-nails rasp and split! — fallen, gone: rising to gulp and scream, sinking to suffocate and gulp and writhe and rise and scream and gulp and sink and go. Like flame, like flame, the vision leapt — upstreaming from the water, shouting in his ears. Thrice he crouched to spring; thrice like flame the vision thundered: thrice passed as flame that bursts before the wind: thrice left him to the stillness, the sucking water, the sound of moaning breath. A fourth time, a last time: ah, now was gone the very will to bring himself to crouch!

He stood a moment, vacant, only trembling. His senses fluttered back to him, and gone, so they informed him, something that before their flight had occupied them. What? In his shaken state he was again a vacant space searching for it before he

realised. Then he knew. There was no sound of breathing. . . .

Trembling he listened for it, staring at the figure. Still; there was no sound. Suddenly he heard it. Dreadfully it came. Feebly, a moaning inspiration: stillness again — then a very little sigh, very gentle, very tiny, and the prone figure quivered, relaxed.

Dead? Again, as on the table rock, afraid to call aloud, "Loony!" Mr. Puddlebox whispered. "Hey, boy!"

No answer. Swelling about him came the creeping water, swayed him, swelled and swayed again: high to his chest, higher now and moving him — moving, sucking, drawing. Here was death: ah, well, wait a moment, for there was death — that piteous thing face downwards there. He spoke softly: "Hey, boy, are you gone?" The water rocked him. He cried brokenly, loudly: "Loony! Are you gone, boy?"

Again, again, life out of death, joy's tumult out of fear!

He saw Mr. Wriford draw down his arms, press on his elbows, raise, then turn towards him his face, most dreadfully grey, most dreadfully drawn in pain.

Who so vile, so base?

Swift, swift revulsion to gladness out of dread. "Why, that's my loony!" cried Mr. Puddlebox in a very loud voice.

Mr. Wriford said: "Have you come?"

"Why, here I am, boy!" He steadied his feet.

Very feebly, scarcely to be heard: "I don't see you."

"Why, there's no more than my nob to be seen, boy! I'm here to my nob in the water." His feet were firm. He braced himself. "I'm to you, boy, and

I'm in the most plaguy place as I challenge any man ever to have been." He crouched. "I've to jump, boy, and how to the devil —"

He launched himself. His foot struck the slipway bank — *no hold!* Smooth rock, and his foot glanced down it! He had thought to spring upward from what purchase his foot might find. It found none. Clutching as he fell, he obtained no more than his arms upon the shingle of the slipway, his chin upon it, his elbows thrusting deep, his fingers clutching in the yielding stones.

"Loony!" Mr. Puddlebox cried. "Loony!"

He slipped further. He suddenly screamed: "Loony, I'm going! Christ, I'm going!"

His face, in line with Mr. Wriford's, two arm's-lengths from it, was dreadfully distorted, his lips wide, his teeth grinding. He choked between them: "Can you help me, boy?"

Mr. Wriford was trying to help him. Mr. Wriford was working towards him on his elbows, his face twisted in agony. As he came, "My legs are broken," he said. "I'll reach you. I'll reach you."

Eye to eye and dreadfully eyed they stared one upon the other. A foot's breadth between them now, and now their fingers almost touching.

"I'm done, boy! Christ, I'm done!" But with the very cry, and with his hand so near to Mr. Wriford's slipped again beyond it, Mr. Puddlebox had sudden change of voice, sudden gleam in the eyes that had stood out in horror. "Curse me, I'm not!" cried Mr. Puddlebox. "Curse me, I've bested it. I've found a hole for my foot. Ease up, boy. I'm to you. By God, I'm to you after all!"

Groan that was prayer of thanks came from Mr. Wriford. Fainting, his head dropped forward on his hands. There was tremendous commotion in the water as Mr. Puddlebox sprang up it from his foothold, thrashing it with his legs as, chest upon the shingle, he struggled tremendously. Then he drew himself out and on his knees, dripping, and bent over Mr. Wriford.

"I'm to you now, boy! You're all right now. Boy, you're all right now."

The swelling water swelled with new impulse up the shingle, washed him where he knelt, ran beneath Mr. Wriford's face, and trickled in the stones beyond it.

Mr. Puddlebox looked back upon it over his shoulder. He could not see the table rock where he had lain. Only the pulpit rock upstood, and deep and black the channel on either hand between it and the walls of their inlet. He looked within the cave mouth before him and could see its inner face. It was no more than a shallow hollowing by the sea. He looked upwards and saw the cliff towering into the night, overhanging as it mounted.

He passed his tongue about his lips.

CHAPTER V

WATER THAT BREAKS AND ROARS

I

IN a very little while Mr. Puddlebox had dragged Mr. Wriford the three paces that gave them the mouth of the cave and had sat him upright there, his back against the cliff. Mr. Wriford had groaned while he was being moved, now he opened his eyes and looked at Mr. Puddlebox bending over him.

"Why, that's my loony!" cried Mr. Puddlebox very cheerfully. The flicker of a smile rewarded him and from the moment of that smile he concealed, until they parted, the terrors that consumed him. "Why, that's my loony!" cried he, and went on one knee, smiling confidently in Mr. Wriford's face. "What's happened to you, boy?"

Mr. Wriford said weakly: "I've broken my legs. I think both my legs are broken." He indicated the pulpit rock with a motion of his head. "I climbed up there. Then I thought I'd jump down. Very high and rocky underneath, but I thought of it, and so I did it. I didn't land properly. I twisted my legs."

He groaned and closed his eyes. "Well, well," said Mr. Puddlebox, holding his hands and patting them. "There, boy, there. You're all right now. I'm to you now, boy."

"I suppose I fainted," Mr. Wriford said. "I found it was night and the tide up to my feet. I began to drag myself. I dragged myself up and up, and the tide followed. Is it still coming?"

"You're all right now, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox. "Boy, you're all right now."

He felt a faint pressure from Mr. Wriford's hands that he held; he saw in Mr. Wriford's eyes the same message that the pressure communicated. He twisted sharply on his heels, turning with a fierce and threatening motion upon the water as one hemmed in by ever-bolder wolves might turn to drive them back.

From where he knelt the water was almost to be touched.

II

Mr. Puddlebox got to his feet and stooped and peered within the cave. The moon silvered a patch of its inner face. It gleamed wetly. He looked to its roof. Water dripped upon his upturned face. The cave would fill, when the tide was full. He caught his breath as he realised that, looked out upon the dark, still sea, and caught his breath again. He stepped out backwards till his feet were in the water and looked up the towering cliff. It made him sick and dizzy, and he staggered a splashing step, then looked again. To the line of the indentation that had seemed like a clump of moustache upon the cave's upper lip, the cliff on either hand showed dark. Above that line its slaty hue was lighter.

That was high-water mark.

He went a step forward and stood on tiptoe. The tips of his fingers could just reach the narrow indenta-

tion — just the tips of his fingers: and sick again he went and dizzy and came down to his heels and turned and stared upon the dark, still sea.

Then he went to Mr. Wriford again and crouched beside him: took his hands and patted them and smiled at him, but did not speak.

Mr. Wriford spoke. He said tonelessly: "Are we going to drown?"

"Drown?" cried Mr. Puddlebox in a very loud voice. "Why, boy, what to the devil has drowning got to do with it? Drown! I was just thinking, that's all. I was thinking of my supper — pork and onions, boy; and when to the devil I shall have had enough, once I get to it, I challenge you to say or any other man. Drown, boy! Why, these poor twisted legs of yours have got into your head to think of such a thing! You can't be thinking this bit of a splash is going to drown us? Why, listen to this, boy —" and with that Mr. Puddlebox turned to the sea and stretching an arm towards it trolled in a very deep voice:

"O ye sea of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him for ever!

"That's all that bit of a splash is going to do," said Mr. Puddlebox very cheerfully; "going to praise the Lord and going to damp our boots if we let it, which, curse me, we won't. All we've got to think about is where we're going to sit till the water goes back where, curse me, it should always be instead of shoving itself up here. One place is as good as another, boy, and there's plenty of them, but I know the best. Now I'm going to shift you back a bit, loony," Mr. Puddlebox continued, standing upright, "and then we're going to sit together a half-hour or so, and then I'm going to

have my pork and onions, and you're going to be carried to bed."

Very tenderly Mr. Puddlebox drew Mr. Wriford back within the cave. "Now you watch me," said Mr. Puddlebox, "because for once in your life I'm the one that's going to do things while you look on. There's only a pair of good legs between us, boy, and that's ample for two of us, but, curse me, they're mine, and I'm going to do what I want with them."

While in jolly accents he spoke thus Mr. Puddlebox was dislodging from the floor of the cave large stones that lay embedded in the shingle and piling them beneath the indentation that showed upon the cave's upper lip. He sang as he worked. Sometimes "O ye sea" as he had trolled before; sometimes "O ye stones;" sometimes, as he tugged at a larger boulder —

"O ye fearful weights, bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him for ever!"

Always with each variation he turned a jolly face to Mr. Wriford; always he turned from Mr. Wriford towards the sea that now had reached the pedestal he was building a face that was grey, that twitched in fear.

"O ye whacking great stones, bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him for ever!"

Knee-high he built his pedestal, working furiously though striving to conceal his haste. Now he stood in water as he strengthened the pile. Now the water had swelled past it and swelled to Mr. Wriford's outstretched feet. Now Mr. Puddlebox climbed upon the mound of stones and brought his head above the narrow indentation above the cave. It showed itself to be a little ledge. He thrust an arm upon it and found it as broad as the length of his forearm, narrowing as it went back to end

in a niche that ran a short way up the cliff. There was room for one to sit there, legs hanging down; perhaps for two — if two could gain it.

Mr. Puddlebox dropped back to the water and now dragged last stones that should make a step to his pile. Then he went to Mr. Wriford.

"Now, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox very cheerfully. "Now I've got the cosiest little seat for you, and now for you to get to it. You can't stand?"

"I can't," Mr. Wriford said.

"Try if I can prop you against the cliff."

He took Mr. Wriford beneath the arms and began to raise him. Mr. Wriford implored: "Don't hurt me!" and as he was raised from the ground screamed dreadfully. "Oh, God! Oh, God, don't, don't;" and when set down again lay feebly moaning: "Don't! Don't!"

There immediately began the most dreadful business.

"Boy," said Mr. Puddlebox, "I've got to hurt you. I'll be gentle as I can, my loony. Boy, you've got to bear it." He abandoned his pretence of their safety, and for his jolly humour that had supported it, permitted voice and speech that denied it and revealed the stress of their position. "Boy, the tide is making on us. It's to fill this cave, boy, before it turns. There's slow drowning waiting for us unless I lift you where I've found a place."

"Let me drown!" Mr. Wriford said. "Oh, let me drown."

The sea drove in and washed the cave on every side. Involuntarily Mr. Wriford cried out in fear and stretched his arms to Mr. Puddlebox, bending above him.

"Come, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox and took him

again beneath the arms: again as he was moved he cried: "Don't! Don't!"

"Boy," cried Mr. Puddlebox fiercely, "will you watch me drown before your eyes?"

"Save yourself then. Save yourself."

"By God Almighty I will not. If you won't let me lift you you shall drown me."

Then determinedly he passed his hands beneath Mr. Wriford's arms; then resolutely shut his ears to dreadful cries of pain; then, then the dreadful business. "Boy, I've got to hurt you. I'll be gentle, my loony. Bear it, boy, oh, for Christ's sake bear it. Round my neck, boy. Hold tight. Bear it, boy; bear it."

He carried his arms round Mr. Wriford's back, downwards and beneath his thighs and locked them there. There were dreadful screams; but dreadfully the water swelled about them, and he held on; there were moans that rent him as they sounded; but he spoke: "Bear it, boy; bear it!" and with his burden waded forth.

He faced from the sea and towards the pedestal he had built.

"Loony!"

"Oh, for God's sake, set me down."

"Now I've to raise you."

He began to press upwards with his arms, raising his burden high on his chest.

"Wade out and drown me," Mr. Wriford cried. "If you've any mercy, for God's sake drown me!"

"You're to obey me, boy. By God, you shall obey me, or I'll hurt you worse. Catch in my hair. Hold yourself up by my hair. High as you can. Up, up!"

He staggered upon the steps he had constructed; he gained the pedestal he had made. He thought the

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strain had become insupportable to him and that he must fall with it. "Now when I lift you, boy, keep yourself up. I'll bring you to my head and then set you back." He called upon himself supremely — raised and failed, raised and failed again. "Now, boy, now!"

He got Mr. Wriford to the ledge and thrust him back; himself he clung to the ledge and almost senseless swayed between his hands and feet.

Presently he looked up. "You're safe now, boy."

Mr. Wriford watched him with eyes that scarcely seemed to see: he scarcely seemed to be conscious.

"I had to speak sharply to you, boy."

Mr. Wriford advanced a hand to him, and he took it and held it. "There was nothing in what I said, boy."

He felt the fingers move in his that covered them. "I had to cry out," Mr. Wriford said weakly. "I couldn't help it."

"You were brave, boy, brave. You're safe now. The water will come to you. But you're safe."

"Come up!" said Mr. Wriford. "Come up!"

"I've to rest a moment, boy," Mr. Puddlebox answered him.

He held that hand while he stood resting. He closed his fingers upon it when presently he spoke again. Now the sea had deepened all about, deep to his knees where he stood. As if the slipway before the cave while it stood dry had somehow abated its volume, it seemed to rise visibly and swiftly now that this last barrier was submerged. All about the walls of the inlet deeply and darkly it swelled, licking the walls and running up them in little wavelets, as beasts of prey, massed in a cage, massing and leaping against the bars.

"There's no great room for me beside you, boy," Mr. Puddlebox said and pressed the fingers that he held.

"Come up," said Mr. Wriford. "Quickly — quickly!"

Mr. Puddlebox looked at the narrow ledge and turned his head this way and that and looked again upon the sea.

III

Now, while he looked and while still he waited, the sea's appearance changed. A wind drove in from seaward and whipped its placid surface. Black it had been, save where the high moon silvered it; grey as it flickered and as it swelled about the cliff it seemed to go. It had welled and swelled; now, from either side the pulpit rock that guarded their inlet, it drove in in steeply heaving mass that flung within the cave and all along the cliff and that the cave and cliff flung back. It were as if one with a whip packed this full cage fuller yet, and as though those caged within it leapt here and there and snapped the air with flashing teeth.

"Now I'll try for it, boy," said Mr. Puddlebox. "These stones are shaking under me."

Mr. Wriford withdrew his hand and with his hands painfully raised himself a little to one side. The action removed his back from the crevice up the cliff face in which it had rested. A growth of hardy scrub clung here, and Mr. Puddlebox thrust forward his hand and pulled on it.

"Now I'll try for it, boy," he said again. He looked up into Mr. Wriford's face. "There's nothing to talk about twixt you and me, loony," he said. "We've had

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some rare days since you came down the road to me, boy. If this bush comes away in my hand and I slip and go, why there's an end to it, boy, and as well one way as another. Don't you be scared."

"I shall hold you," Mr. Wriford said. Intensity filled out and strengthened his weak voice. "I shall hold you. I'll never let you go."

There began some protest out of Mr. Puddlebox's mouth. It was not articulated when the rising sea mastered at last the stones beneath his feet; drove from him again his courage; returned him again his panic fear; and he cried out, and swiftly crouched and sprang. He achieved almost his waist to the level of the ledge. He swept up his other hand to the scrub in the crevice and fastened a double grip within it. It was hold or go, but the scrub held and his peril that he must hold or go gave him immense activity. He drew himself and forced himself. His knee nearer to Mr. Wriford came almost upon the ledge, and Mr. Wriford caught at the limb and gripped it as with claws. "Your other knee!" Mr. Wriford cried. "Higher! For God's sake a little higher!"

The further knee struck the ledge wide out where it no more than showed upon the cliff.

"Higher! Higher!"

Horribly from Mr. Puddlebox, as from one squeezed in the throat and in death straining a last word: "Hold me! Hold me, boy! Don't let me drown in that water!"

"Higher! Higher!"

"Don't let me drown — don't let me drown in that water!"

"Higher! An inch — an inch higher."

The inch was gained. "Now! Now!"

The knee dug into the very rock upon its inch of hold. Mr. Puddlebox clutched higher in the scrub, drew up his other leg, drew in his knees and knelt against the cliff.

Unstrung, and breathing in spasmodic clutches of his chest, he remained a space in that position, and Mr. Wriford collapsed and in new pain leant back where he sat. Presently, and very precariously, Mr. Puddlebox began to twist about and lowered himself to sit upon the ledge. The crevice where the ledge was broadest was between them. Mr. Puddlebox with his left hand held himself in his seat by the scrub that filled this niche, and when Mr. Wriford smiled weakly at him and weakly murmured, "Safe now," he replied: "There's very little room, boy," and looked anxiously upon the sea that now in angry waves was mounting to them. He looked from there to the dark line on either hand that marked the height of the tide's run. The line was level with his waist as he sat. He looked at Mr. Wriford and saw how narrow his perch, and down to the sea again. He said to himself: "That's four times I've been a dirty coward." He said in excuse: "Takes your breath," and caught his breath and looked upon the sea.

IV

Now was full evidence, and evidence increasing, of that "blowing up dirty" of which he had been informed, and which the stillness of the swelling water had seemed to falsify. "Why don't you break and roar?" Mr. Puddlebox had asked the sea. White and loud it broke along the cliff, snatching up to them, falling away as

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beasts that crouch to spring, then up and higher and snatching them again. The moon, as if her watch was up, withdrew in clouds and only sometimes peered. The wind, as if he now took charge, came strongly and strongly called the sea. The sea, as if the moon released it, broke from her stilly bonds and gave itself to vicious play. Strongly it rose. It reached their hanging feet. Stronger yet as night drew on, and now set towards the corner of the inlet nearer to Mr. Wri-ford's side and there, repulsed, washed up, and there, upspringing, washed in a widening motion towards their ledge.

They sat and waited, rarely with speech.

At long intervals Mr. Puddlebox would say: "Boy!"

No more than a moan would answer him.

"That's all right, boy."

V

Quite suddenly the water came. Without premonitory splash or leap of spray, quite suddenly, and strongly, deeply, that widening motion where the sea leapt in its corner came like a great hand sweeping high and washed the ledge from end to end — like a hand sweeping and, of its suddenness and volume, raised and swept and shook them where they sat.

At this its first coming, neither spoke of it. There was only a gasp from each as each was shaken. It did not seem to be returning.

After a space, "Boy!" said Mr. Puddlebox again.

"Well? . . . well?"

"That's all right, boy."

He clung with his left hand to the scrub. He brought

over his right and rested it upon Mr. Wriford's that held the ledge. "Is the pain bad, boy?"

"I'm past pain. I don't feel my legs at all."

"Cold, boy?"

"I don't feel anything. I keep dreaming. I think it's dreaming."

"That's all right, boy."

Again, and again suddenly, that sweeping movement swept them — stronger in force, greater in volume. It swept Mr. Wriford towards Mr. Puddlebox. It almost dislodged him. He was pressed back and down by Mr. Puddlebox's hand, and again the water came. They were scarcely recovered, and once again it struck and shook them.

Now they sat waiting for its onsets. Now the gasp and dreadful struggle while the motion swept and sucked was scarcely done when on and fierce and fiercer yet again it came and shook them.

Now what happened — long in the telling — happened very quickly.

"It's the end — it's the end," Mr. Wriford sobbed — his gasps no more than sobbing as each snatch came. "God, God, it's the end!"

"Hell to the end!" cried Mr. Puddlebox fiercely and fiercely holding him. "Loony, there's nothing here to end us! Boy, do you mind that coastguard we passed early back? He walks here soon after daybreak, he told us, when this bloody tide is down. He'll help me carry you down. Boy, with your back in this niche here you're safe though the sea washes ever so. I'm going to leave you to it. Wedge in, boy."

He began to sidle away.

Fiercely the sweeping movement struck them, stop-

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ping Mr. Wriford's protest, driving him to the ledge's centre, all but carrying Mr. Puddlebox whence he clung.

He thrust Mr. Wriford against the niche and roughly tore his hand from Mr. Wriford's grasp.

"What are you doing?" Mr. Wriford cried. "Giving me your place — no, no —!"

Fiercely was answered: "Hell to giving my place! Not me, curse me! I'm going for safety, boy." He indicated the pulpit rock whose surface dryly upstood before them. "Easy to get on there. I'm going to swim there."

"You can't swim! No — you shall not — no!"

Again the beat of rushing water. Scarcely seated where he had edged, Mr. Puddlebox was dragged away, clung, and was left upon the ledge's last extremity. As glad and radiant as ever it had been, the old jolly beam came to his face, to his mouth the old jolly words. "Swim! Why, boy, I'd swim that rotten far with my hands tied. Curse me, I'd never go if I couldn't. Swim! Why, curse me, I will swim you or any man, and I challenge any to the devil to best me at it. Wedge back, boy. Wedge back."

He turned away his jolly face, and to the waiting water turned a face drawn and horrible in fear.

Water that takes your breath!

He swung himself forward on his hands and dropped. He drowned instantly.

* * * * *

There had been no pretence of swimming. There seemed to be no struggle. In one moment he had been balancing between his hands in seated posture on the ledge. In the next down and swallowed up and gone.

Eyes that looked to see him rise and swim stared,

stared where he was gone and whence he came not: then saw his body rise — all lumped up, the back of its shoulders, not its head. Then watched it, all lumped up, slightly below the surface, bobbed tossing round the cliff within the inlet: out of sight in the further corner: now bumping along the further wall: now submerged and out of view. Now washed against the pulpit rock: now a long space bumping about it: now drawn beyond it: gone.

BOOK FOUR

ONE OF THE OLDEST ONES





BOOK FOUR

ONE OF THE OLDEST ONES

CHAPTER I

KINDNESS WITHOUT GRATITUDE

I

IN the place where Mr. Wriford next found himself he first heard the reverberant thunder of the sea. He realised with sudden terror that he was not holding on; and as one starting out of bad dreams — but he had no dreams — in sudden terror he clutched with both his hands. That which his hands clutched folded soft and warm within their grasp, and then he heard a pleasant voice say:

“Why, there you are! You’ve kept us waiting a long time, you know!”

He found he was in a bed. A man, and two women who wore white aprons and caps and nice blue dresses, stood at its foot and were smiling at him. The sun was shining on their faces, and it was through windows behind him that the sound of the sea came. While, very puzzled, he watched these smiling strangers, the man stepped to him and slipped firm, reassuring fingers about his wrist where his hand lay clutching the blue quilt that covered him.

"No need to cling on like that, you know," said the man, disengaging his grasp. "You're all right now."

Mr. Wriford made one or two attempts at speech. "I don't — I don't think I — I don't think —"

He checked himself each time. His voice sounded so weak and strange that he thought each time to better it. He was not successful; and he let it go as it would with: "I don't think I ought to be here."

The women smiled at that, and the man said: "Well, I don't know where else you should be, I'm sure. You're very comfortable here."

"You're just in the middle of a nice sleep, you know," said one of the women, bending over the bed-rail towards him. "I think I should just finish it if I were you."

The other one said: "Would you like to hold my hand again?"

"There's an offer for you," said the man. "I'm sure I would."

There was a sound of quiet laughter, and the woman who had last spoken came to a chair by Mr. Wriford's side and sat down and took his hand. He somehow felt that that was what he had wanted, and he closed his eyes.

Thereafter he often — for moments as brief as this first meeting — saw the three again; and learnt to smile when he saw them, responsive to the smiles they always had for him, and became accustomed to their names of "Doctor" and "Sister" and "Nurse." It was "Nurse" who sat beside him and held his hand. When he awoke — or whatever these brief glimpses of these kind strangers were — he always awoke with that same startled clutching as when he had first seen them. If it was only the warm folding stuff that his

hands felt he would cling on a moment, vacantly terrified. When Nurse's hand was there he felt all right at once and learnt to smile a kind of apology.

Once — or one day, he had no consciousness of time — when he thus clutched and felt her hand and smiled, she said: "You shouldn't start like that. You needn't now, you know."

"I don't know why I do," he told her.

She said: "I expect you're thinking of —"

But Mr. Wriford wasn't thinking at all. He was only rather vacantly puzzled when he saw his three kind friends. Beyond that his mind held neither thoughts nor dreams.

II

Thought came suddenly in a very roundabout way. Nurse had a very childish face. Her skin was very pink and white, and her eyes very blue, and there was something very childish, almost babyish, about her soft brows and about her rosy mouth. Her face began to have a place with Mr. Wriford, not only when he looked at it, but when he was sleeping. When he was sleeping, though, it had a different body, a different dress. It thus, in that different guise, was with him when one day he awoke and saw her bending close over him, smiling at him. He said at once, the word coming to him without any searching for it, without conscious intention of pronouncing it: "Brida!"

She said "What?" Now thoughts were visibly struggling in his eyes. Nurse could see them changing all the aspect of his face, as though his eyes were a pool up into which, stirred by that word, thoughts came

streaming as stilly depths are stirred from their clearness by some fish that darts along their floor and upward clouds their bed. She turned her head and whispered sharply: "Sister!" then back to him and asked him: "What a pretty name! Brida, did you say?"

His mind was rushed long past the word that had awakened it. First, with that awakening, had come the moment when first he had spoken it — "I'm going to call you Brida!" St. James's Park; dusk falling; the rustle of October leaves about their feet; her flower face redly suffused. . . . More than that called him. More! In this sudden tumult of his brain, these beating pulses, all these noises, more, more than these demanded recognition; fiercely some clamour called him on to emotions that wrapped up these, submerged, enveloped them. There had been one in these emotions that claimed him more than she; there had been fears, pains, perils in them — ah, here with a sudden, overwhelming rush they came! "Wedge in, boy! Wedge in!" He that had called those words was swinging on his hands — hands that had held him! — was swinging on his hands above the swirling water — was down, was gone!

Mr. Wriford screamed out shockingly: "You couldn't swim! You couldn't swim!"

Sister was saying: "There, there! Don't, don't! You're all right now! You're all right now! Look, Nurse will hold your hand."

He stared at her. He said brokenly: "Let me alone! Let me alone!"

"Shan't Nurse hold your hand?"

"Please let me alone."

III

He only wanted to be alone — alone with his thoughts that now were full and clear returned to him — alone with that grotesque figure with that grotesque name who had come to him through the water and for him had gone into the water — and could not swim, could not swim!

He slept and awoke now and lay awake in normal periods. He smiled at Nurse and Sister and Doctor but did not talk. He only wanted to be alone. He would lie through the day for hours together with wide, staring eyes, submitting passively when some one came to attend him or to feed him, but never speaking. He only wanted to be alone.

Strangers came sometimes — ladies with flowers, mostly. He came to recognize them. They smiled at him, and he smiled responsively at them. But never spoke. He only wanted to be alone. When they were quite strangers — visitors he had not seen before — he always heard Sister bringing them with the same words: "This is our very interesting patient. Yes, this is the private ward. It is rather nice, isn't it? Our interesting patient. Poor fellow, he —" and then whispering, and then Sister at the foot of the bed with some one who smiled and nodded and said: "Good morning. I hope you are better."

He never turned his head as the voices announced approach from somewhere on his left. He never gave direct thought either to Sister's familiar words that brought them or to the whispering that followed.

Voices and persons passed as it were at a very, very long distance before him. He only wanted to be alone; to lie there; to think, to think.

IV

A morning notable in its early hours for much uncommon bustle on the part of Sister and Nurse aroused him at last to consciousness that something was expected of him and that he must give attention to where he was and what was going on about him. Sister and Nurse, who always wore their cheerful blue cotton dresses until the afternoon, appeared this morning in their serge gowns. Doctor, who was generally in a tweed suit with cyclist trouser clips at his ankles, came in a frock-coat and wriggling his hands with the action of a man unaccustomed to having stiff cuffs about his wrists. The blue quilt was exchanged for a white one with roses down the centre associated with the days when a harmonium was played somewhere in the building and when the sound of hymns floated across Mr. Wriford's thoughts.

"Visiting Committee Day to-day," Sister told Mr. Wriford, "and Doctor's going to have a talk with you when he comes. I should try and talk, you know. Isn't there a lot you want to hear about?"

This was a question Sister often asked him, but to which he never responded with more than: "I'd just like to be alone, Sister." To-day the unusual bustle and stir had already shaken the steady vigil of his thoughts, and he said: "Yes — yes, thank you, I think I would."

Then Doctor in the frock-coat and with the wriggling hands —

"Well, we'll just have a talk," said Doctor, speaking to Sister but looking at Mr. Wriford, after the usual examination and questions. And when Sister had left them he sat on the side of the bed and began. "You've had a rough passage, you know," said Doctor. "But you're going on fine now. I've just let you be, but I think you ought to begin to talk a bit now. You're feeling pretty fit?"

"I'm very strong really," said Mr. Wriford. "I'm weak now, but I'm very strong really. I feel all right. I'm sorry I've not said much. I've been thinking."

"That's all right," said Doctor. "You've been mending, too, while you've been quiet. Do you remember everything?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Remember the coastguards finding you?"

"No, I don't remember that."

Doctor laughed. "I expect you're further behind-hand than you think, then. How long do you think you've been here? — nearly two months!"

Mr. Wriford said without emotion: "Two months. Will you tell me the date, please?"

"December — nearly Christmas. It's Christmas next week. Now look here, what about your friends? We must send them a happy Christmas from you, what?"

"I've no friends," said Mr. Wriford.

"No friends! None at all? Come, you must have, you know."

"I've not," said Mr. Wriford. "Look here, as soon as I'm well, I'll go away. That's all I want."

Doctor looked puzzled. "Got a name, I suppose?"

"Wriford."

"Wriford — that's funny. I've just finished reading again — you're no relation to the author, I suppose? Philip Wriford?"

Mr. Wriford smiled and shook his head.

"Jove, he can write!" said Doctor with inconsequent enthusiasm. "Read any of — ? You're an educated man, aren't you?"

"I'm a working man," said Mr. Wriford. "No, I don't read much."

Doctor seemed to be thinking for a moment more of the Wriford who wrote than of the Wriford who lay here. Recollecting himself he went on: "How did you get there — where the coastguards found you?"

"I was tramping — looking for work. I got cut off. Will you tell me, please? Where is this place?"

Doctor told him. This was Port Rannock — the cottage hospital. The coastguards had found him wedged up on the cliff and brought him in. Touch and go for a very long time while he lay unconscious — unconscious nearly a month. They had mended his legs — one broken, the knee of the other sprained — fever — "all sorts of things," said Doctor, smiling. "But we've fixed you up now," he ended. "You're on the road now all right," and he went on to explain the real business of this talk and of the Visiting Committee's intentions when they came. Mr. Wriford was to be moved. "Only a Cottage Hospital, you see," and the bed was wanted. There had been a landslip where some local men were working — five cases — the main ward simply crowded out. Mr. Wriford must go to the town infirmary over at Pendra — unless —

"Sure you haven't any friends?" said Doctor, look-

ing at Mr. Wriford closely. "Quite sure? Committee here? All right, Sister, I'm coming. Quite sure?"

Mr. Wriford said: "Quite. I had one. He was with me. He was drowned. Did they find — ?"

"Why, the coastguards who found you found a body on the shore the same day. Was that your friend? A big man — stout?"

"That was my friend," said Mr. Wriford; and asked: "Is he buried here?"

"In the churchyard. We knew nothing who he was, of course. There's just a wooden cross. You'd like to see it when you're better. They've kept his things, or at least a list of them. You could identify by them. Had he any friends?"

"Only me. I think only me. We met on the road."

"Poor chap," said Doctor. "Washed off, I suppose?"

"No, he jumped off. He couldn't swim."

Doctor, who was going obedient to Sister's call, turned and exclaimed: "Jumped off? Why?"

But Mr. Wriford was lying back as he had lain these many days, thinking.

V

Visiting Committee. Visiting Committee tramped and shuffled into the room and grouped about his bed and stared at him — one clergyman addressed as Vicar, one very red gentleman addressed as Major, two other men and two ladies; all rather fat and not very smartly groomed as though one rather ran to seed at Port Rannock and didn't bother much about brushing one's coat-collar or pressing one's trousers or — for the

ladies — keeping abreast of the fashions. All meaning to be kind, but all, after a while, rather inclined to be huffy with this patient whose story Doctor had reported, whom Doctor considered fit to be moved, but who displayed no gratitude for all that had been done for him, nor any sort of emotion when told that he would be sent to Pendra Infirmary at the end of the week.

Visiting Committee opened with a cheery joke on the part of Major at which everybody smiled towards the patient, but to which the patient made no sort of response. Visiting Committee in the persons of Major and Vicar fired a few questions based upon Doctor's information, at first kindly and then rather abrupt. Patient just lay with wide eyes that never turned towards the speaker and either answered: "Yes, thank you," or "No, thank you," or did not answer at all. Visiting Committee thought patient ungracious and said so to itself as it moved away.

"You ought to have spoken to them," said Nurse a little reproachfully, coming to him afterwards. "You ought just to have said a little, Wriford — that's your name, isn't it? I think they'd have let you stay over Christmas if you had. Wouldn't you have liked to stay with us for Christmas?"

"I just want to be alone," said Mr. Wriford.

"I told him," said Nurse, reporting this conversation to Sister later in the day, "I told him that of course he'd had a terrible time, but that he ought really to try not to think so much about himself. You know, when I said that he turned his head right round to me, a thing he never does, and stared at me in the oddest way."

VI

If that was so it remained the only thing that aroused him all the time he was at the Cottage Hospital. Even when the ambulance came over from Pendra Infirmary, and Nurse and Sister tucked him up in it and commended him to the care of the Infirmary nurse who came in the carriage, even then, beyond thanking them quietly, he neither turned his head for a last look nor seemed in any degree distracted from his steady thoughts. He just lay as before, gazing straight before him and thinking, and continued so to lie and think when they got him to bed in the large convalescent ward at the Infirmary.

"Matey," said a husky voice from the bed beside him, "Matey, I've got me portograph in the Daily Mirror paper. I'm the oldest sea-captain living, and I've got all me faculties except only me left eye. Can't you move, Matey? I've got me portograph in the Daily Mirror paper. I'll show you, Matey."

A sharp call down the ward. "Father! Get back into bed this minute, Father! I never did! What are you thinking about? Get back this minute, Father!"

The oldest sea-captain living objected querulously:

"I've got me portograph in the Daily Mirror paper."

"Yes, and I'll take it away from you if you don't lie still."

"Matey," said the oldest sea-captain living, "Matey, I've got me portograph in the Daily Mirror paper."

He lay gazing before him, just thinking, thinking.

CHAPTER II

QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

I

THESE occupied Mr. Wriford's thoughts. First of that sacrifice made for him when, without hint of it, without so much as good-bye, Mr. Puddlebox had swung off his hands from the ledge and gone down into the sea. Why made for him? How?

Doctor had asked it over at the Cottage Hospital:

"Jumped off? Why?"

Ah, why? Search it through the long days, ask it of the night. Follow, ah, follow it in dreaming; awake to question it anew! Sacrifice made for him! What must have been suffered in the determination to make it? What in its dreadful act? And why, why? Well, if no answer to that, set it aside — set Why aside and seek to find How? How done? Its courage wherein found, where?

Why? How? How? Why? Ah, questions unanswerable; ah, solutions never to be found! Doctor's questions over at the Cottage Hospital; wholly and sanely Mr. Wriford's questions, there as he lay gazing before him in the little room at Port Rannock, here as he lay in the convalescent ward at Pendra Infirmary. Why? How? How? Why? Wholly and sanely his by day and day succeeding day, by night and night

succeeding night. Wholly and sanely his — coldly his.

Coldly: in time, and in the ceaseless effort to answer them as strength returned and as he was encouraged to get up and walk the ward, he found himself thinking, nay, forced himself to think, of Mr. Puddlebox without emotion: without emotion watching that very scene upon the ledge, that drop into the water, that lumped-up body bobbing round the cliff. For him! Was he worth it? No, not worthy it in any degree. Had he done anything to deserve it? He had done nothing. Narrowly, coldly, he searched every moment of his days in Mr. Puddlebox's company. There was not one revealed a single action, even a single thought, that might give claim to such a sacrifice. Far from it! Consciously and actively and intentionally he had lived in all that period for himself alone. Till then he had devoted all his life to others. Through all the time thereafter it had been his aim to live for himself — to care for no one's feelings, himself to have no feelings: simply to do things, simply to inflict upon his body whatsoever recklessness his mind conceived: through his body experience it, in his mind never to be touched by it. Whatever suffering it had caused him, gleefully he had relished. But Mr. Puddlebox also it had caused suffering and discomfort, and Mr. Puddlebox had not relished it at all: very much the reverse. What claim then had he on Mr. Puddlebox's affections?

Affections! What had affections to do with such a case? Admit affections — God alone knew why, but admit that the companionship of their many days together, their many adventures, experiences, had aroused common affection in Mr. Puddlebox. Admit

that you scarcely could live with a man day by day, night by night, hour by hour, without of two results one: hating him and leaving him, or becoming accustomed to him and accepting him. That might arouse affections, just as affections might be aroused by any inanimate thing always carried: a stick, a penknife, a comfortable old coat. Admit affections then: what had affection to do with accepting that dreadful death — or any death? That was more than affection. That was as much more than affection as a mountain a hill, an ocean a stream. That was love: nay, that was love's very apotheosis. Ridiculous, outrageous to imagine for himself in Mr. Puddlebox any love: how much more preposterous love in that degree! Preposterous, ridiculous — then why? Leave it — ah, leave it, leave it, and come to How. Think of it coldly. Divorce emotion from its searching and coldly examine How. How had Mr. Puddlebox gone to such a death? What found within himself, what quality possessed, to swing him off his hands and go, and drown, and die? Courage? Be cold, be cruel, be sane! Courage? Puddlebox had no courage. Carelessness of life? He was very fond of life. Look at the man! Remember him, not as he died, but in his grotesque personality as he lived. Consider his idle, slothful habit of mind and of body. Recall his dislike of work, of any hardship. Look at his ideal of comfort — to shuffle about the countryside doing nothing; to have food to eat; to get comfortably drunk. How in such character the courage to die so suddenly, so horribly? How? Lo, How was more impossible than Why. Nay, How was Why. What but supremest love could have invested him with strength to go to such a death? What but divinest love to conceive of such a

sacrifice? And love was out of consideration. Useless to try to delude these questions with: "He must have loved me." Clear that he could not have. Then why? Then done by possession of what attribute? Was there some quality in life unknown to Mr. Wriford?

II

Ah, was there? That same question, a barrier insurmountable, a void dark, boundless, unfathomable, similar to that which ended his questioning of Mr. Puddlebox's sacrifice, ended also his searching along another train of thought which, as he grew stronger, more and more closely occupied him — inquiry relative to his own condition. He had had a shot at life. He had cast aside every bond, every scruple, every fear, every habit, which formerly — as he had thought — had tied him up in misery. That phase was over. It attracted no more. He had longed to do it; he had done it. What profit? He was very weak. He found that there had passed out of him with the vigour of his body the violent desire to make his body do and feel and suffer. Vigour would return. He would grow stronger. Daily already he was regaining strength. But that desire never would return. It had been exorcised. It had been fulfilled. When he was in London, when he was in all the tumult of that London life, he had thought — God! if only he could break away from it all! break away and rest his mind and bring the labour of living from his head to his hands, from his brain to his body! He had imagined his hands hard, his body sweating, his mind free, and he had thought: "God, God, there, there, could I but get at it, lies, not the labour of living, but the

joy of living!" Well, he had got at it. He had done it. Horny and hard he had made his hands; sore and asweat he had wearied his body. What profit? He had wanted to do things — things arduous, reckless, violent. He had done them. What benefit? He had wanted to care for nobody and nothing, to mind nobody's feelings, to have none himself. He had done it. He had wantonly insulted, he had wilfully outraged; he had mastered fear, he had stifled moral consciousness. What virtue? Look back upon it! That which he had desired to do he had done. He had seized the course where labour of living should be made joy of living. He had run it to the uttermost. Mad dog — he had lived, as he had wished to live, a mad dog life, impervious to all sensation, moral or physical. No qualm, no scruple, no thought, no fear had checked him. He had drunk of it full and drunk of it deep. What profit? Soul, soul, look back with me and see where we have come! In the old life never free. In the new life utterly free. In the old responsible. Utterly irresponsible in the new. In the old tied up — tied up, that had been his cry. In the new released. What profit? In the old assured that happiness lay in the new. Now the new tried, and happiness still to seek — nay, happiness more lost, more deeply hidden than ever before. Then it had seemed to lie in freedom; now freedom had been searched and it was not. Where then? Was there some secret of happiness that he had missed?

Suppose he were strong again. Imagine the few weeks passed that would return him his strength and let him leave this place. Would he go back to the wild things, the reckless things, the schooling of his body by exposure to pain, to hunger, to fatigue? No, for it had

been tried. No, for he had tasted it and was nothing attracted to taste of it again. Was he afraid of its hurts? No, impervious to them, minding them not at all. But he had exulted in them, he had been exalted by them. He had believed they were leading somewhere. Ah, here he was looking back upon them, and he knew that they led nowhere. He had come through them, and he found himself come through empty. They might fall about him again when he was strong and went out to them — they might fall about him, but they would arouse nothing in him. He might once again challenge them and cause them furiously to assail him. He would know while he did so and while they scourged him that they were barren of virtue, empty, dry as ashes, profitless, containing nothing, concealing nothing.

Where stood he? Where? Look, in the old days he had been slave of his mind, hounded by his brain. He had cast that away. He had escaped from it. Look, in the new he had turned for joy of living to his body and had mastered his body and all his fears and all his thoughts. He had lived through two lives — life that was not his own but given to others; life that was all his own and to none but himself belonged. Fruitless both. Was there some secret of happiness that he had missed?

III

Ah, was there? This, as the new year broke its bonds, displaced all other thoughts, became Mr. Wriford's sole obsession. Was there something in life that he had missed? He was able now to take exercise daily in the Infirmary grounds. He would go on these occasions to

its furthest recesses. His desire was to escape the other inmates of the convalescent ward; to be alone; to get away where in solitude he could pursue the question that ceaselessly he revolved: Was there some secret of happiness that he had missed? He brought, he could bring, no train of sequent reasoning to its investigation. He merely brooded upon it. He merely reviewed life as he had known it, saw how it had crumbled at every step, and how it crumbled anew at every re-examination of it, and wondered vaguely was there some quality might have been brought into it to cement it into a stable bridge that would have borne him cheerily upraised upon it, something that might yet be found — something that he had missed? And often, as his review carried him searching along the period of Mr. Puddlebox, wondered vaguely whether the final question of that sacrifice was related to this final question of himself. Had Mr. Puddlebox some quality unknown to him? Was there something in life that he himself had missed? Were the two questions one question? Was there one answer that should supply both answers?

IV

Daily, walking in the grounds or watching from the windows, he watched the new year struggling from her bonds. He came to greet her in all her different moods as a sentient creature — to envisage her as one in like situation to his own. She was struggling for freedom — nay, not for freedom, but for her own possession. The old year had her. In winter's guise he held her. Sometimes she escaped him, sometimes she was laughing

all about and everywhere, a young thing, a wild thing, a timid thing. For three days together she would so reign, smiling, fluttering, free. Then winter snatched her back, overlaid her, jealously crushed her in his iron bonds. Sometimes she wept. Sometimes here and there she ran and laid her pretty trinkets on branch and bough and hedge. Winter would out and catch her, drag her away, despoil all her little traces. Sometimes she fought him. Sometimes as she smiled, as she danced, as she bedecked herself, winter would come shouting, blustering, threatening. A bonny sight to see her hold her own! Bolder she grew, weaker he. He had his moments. She sulked, she cried, she pouted, then laughingly she tricked him. Here he would catch her. Look, there she was away! Here tear up her handiwork: look, there her fingers ran! His legions sank exhausted: she laughed and called her own. Warmly, timidly, fragrantly her breezes moved about her; greenly, freshly, radiantly she smiled to their caress. They piped, she danced. She was out, she was free. She was high upon the hillside, she was deep within the valley, she was painting in the hedgerows, she was piping in the trees.

Where aimed she? Ah, this was but the budding! Soon, soon, supreme, content, mistress of all and of herself she'd reign through starry nights, through steadfast, silent days. Peace she pursued, serenity, content. Peace she would win. Mr. Wriford turned from her when thus far his thoughts had followed her. Daily before him, petulant she struggled. He had struggled. Soon she'd be free. He had been free. Then pressed she on to happiness. He?

Was there some secret of happiness he had missed?

CHAPTER III

CRACKJAW NAME FOR MR. WRIFORD

I

STRONGER now. He was left very much alone by the other inmates of the convalescent ward, and that was what he wished. Strange folk themselves, some with odd ways, some with ugly, they accepted strangeness in others as a proper qualification for those greater comforts which made this department of the workhouse a place highly desirable. The one common sympathy among them was to present their several ailments as obstinately and as alarmingly as possible, and they respected the endeavour in one another. Except when order of dismissal and return to the workhouse came among them. The victim upon whom the blow fell would then most shamelessly round upon his mates in a manner that filled the ward with indignant alarm and protestation.

"Me quite strong!" the unhappy victim would cry. "What about old George there? He's stronger than me. What about old Tom? What about Mr. Harris? What about Captain Peter? Shamming! They're all shamming! Ask old George what he told me yesterday. Never felt better in his life; he told me. Ask old Tom. Can't get enough to eat 'e's that 'arty, he says. Me! It's a public scandal. It's a public scandal this ward is. Taking out a dying man, that's what you're doing,

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and leaving a pack of shamblers! Look at Mr. Graggs there! Look at him. Ever see a sick man look like that? Public scandal! Public — ”

Outraged victim led protesting away. Horrified convalescents dividing their energies between smiling wanly, as though at the point of death and therefore charitable to victim's ravings, and protesting volubly at his infamous aspersions.

Mr. Wriford, only wishing to be left alone, escaped these bitter attacks from injured victims just as for a long time he escaped from matron and doctors the form of attention which aroused alarm in the ward. He mixed with his fellow-convalescents not at all, and this aloofness, in a community where garrulity on the subject of aches and pains and bad weather and discontent with food was the established order, earned him in full the solitude which alone he desired. Its interruption was most endangered in those hours of wet days, and in the evenings, when, out of bed and dressed, the convalescents were cooped up within the ward. At the least there was always then the risk of being caught by the oldest sea-captain living with his ceaseless: “Matey! Matey, I've got me portograph in the Daily Mirror paper!” and sometimes the descent upon him of some other infirm old gentleman who, worsted and enraged in some battle of ailments with cronies, would espy Mr. Wriford seated remote and alone and bear down upon him with his cargo of ills.

II

To escape these attentions Mr. Wriford learnt to simulate absorption in one of the out-of-date illustrated

weekly papers with which for its intellectual benefit the ward was supplied. No thought that these papers were once a part of his daily life, himself a very active factor in theirs, ever stirred him as he turned the pages or gazed with unseeing eyes upon them. His fingers turned the pages: his mind, in search of Was there some secret of happiness he had missed? revolved the leaves of retrospection that might disclose it — but never did. His head would bend intensely above a picture or a column of letterpress: his eyes, not what was printed saw, but saw himself as he had been, somehow missing — what?

Seclusion by this means for his searching after his problem brought him one day to an occurrence that did actually concentrate his attention on the printed page before his eyes — a page of illustrated matter that concerned himself. A new batch of weekly periodicals had been placed in the ward — dated some two months back. He took one from the batch, opened it at random, and seated himself, with eyes fixed listlessly upon it, as far as might be from the gossiping groups gathered about the fires at each end of the ward. Absorbed more deeply than usual in his thoughts, he carelessly allowed it to be apparent that the journal was not holding his attention. It lay upon his knee. His eyes wandered from its direction.

"Matey," said the oldest sea-captain living, suddenly springing upon him, "Matey, I got me portograph in the Daily Mirror paper. You ain't never 'ad a fair look at it, Matey."

"Not now," said Mr. Wriford. "I'm reading."

He took up the paper that had rested on his knees; but the oldest sea-captain living placed upon it his

cherished cutting from the Daily Mirror paper. "Well, read that, Matey," said the oldest sea-captain living. "That's better than any bit you've got there. Look, Matey. Look what it says." He indicated with a trembling finger the smudged and thumbbed lettering beneath the smudged picture and read aloud: "'One of the most remarkable men to be found in our work-usses — those re— those rep— those repositteries of strange 'uman flotsam — is Cap'n Henery Peters, the oldest sea-captain living.' That's me, Matey. See my face? 'Cap'n Henery —'"

"Yes," said Mr. Wriford. "Yes. That's fine," and took up the cutting and handed it back.

"You ain't finished reading of it," protested the oldest sea-captain living.

"I have. I read quicker than you. I'll read it again in a minute. I just want to finish this. I'm in the middle of it."

The oldest sea-captain living protested anew. "You wasn't reading when I come up to you. I saw you wasn't."

"I was thinking. I'd just stopped to think."

It was an unfortunate excuse, arousing a fellow sympathy in the oldest sea-captain living. "Why, they do make you think, some of the words they writes, don't they?" said he. "Look at my bit — re— rep— repositteries — there's one for yer. What's a re— rep— reposittery?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I don't neither, Matey," said the oldest sea-captain living, "an' I don't suppose that young chap as wrote it did." He pointed to the page upon which Mr. Wriford seemed to be engaged. "It's a cracker,

Matey. You got some crackers there too by the look of it." He put his finger on a word of title lettering that ran in bold type across the top. "W-r-i-f-o-r-d," he spelt. "That's a crackjaw name for yer. What's it spell, Matey?"

But Mr. Wriford, attracted by the crackjaw name thus indicated, was now giving a real attention to the paper. The oldest sea-captain living concentrated upon his own beloved features in the Daily Mirror paper, and, engrossed upon them, drifted away.

Mr. Wriford read the headline, boldly printed:

"THE WRIFORD BOOM: ANOTHER BRILLIANT NOVEL."

It was a review — a remarkable eulogy — of the novel he had finished and deposited with his agent shortly before that sudden impulse on the Thames embankment. It was embellished with photographs of himself, with reproductions of the covers of his two earlier novels, with inscriptions announcing the prodigious number of editions into which they seemed to have gone, and with extracts of "exquisite" or "thought-provoking" or "witty" passages set in frames. Beneath that flaming "The Wriford Boom: Another Brilliant Novel" was a long sub-title in small black type epitomizing all that lay beneath it. Mr. Wriford read it curiously. In part it dealt with what was described in inverted commas as his "disappearance." Evidently much on that head was general knowledge. The writer scamped details leading up to his main point, the Wriford Boom and the contribution thereto of a brilliant new novel, with many a plausible "Of course." The mystery of the disappearance which

was "of course" no longer a mystery; Mr. Wriford had "of course" been seen by a friend leaving Charing Cross by the Continental train a few days after his disappearance; later he had "of course" been seen in Paris, and he was now "of course" living somewhere on the Continent in complete seclusion. The writer contrasted this modest escape from lionisation with the conduct of other authors who "of course" need not be named, and proceeded to tremendous figures of book-sales, and of advance orders for the present volume, making his point finally with "A boom which, if started by the sensational 'disappearance,' has served to make almost every section of the general public share in the rare literary quality enjoyed by — comparatively speaking — the few who recognized Mr. Wriford's genius at the outset."

Mr. Wriford read it all curiously, with a sense of complete detachment. He looked at the photographs of himself, recalling the circumstances in which each had been taken and feeling himself somehow as unrecognisably different from them as the convalescent ward was different from the surroundings shown by the camera. He read the review of the new book, especially the passages quoted from it, recalling the thoughts with which each had been written and feeling them somehow to have belonged, not to himself, but to some other person who had communicated them to him and now had committed them to print. He reckoned idly and roughly the royalties that were represented by the prodigious figures of sales, and realised that a very great deal of money must be awaiting him in his agent's hands. But the thought of the money — the positive wealth to which it amounted — stirred him no more than the

glowing terms of his appreciation in critical and popular opinion. It aroused only this thought: the memory that, in the days represented by those photographs, money then also had given him no smallest satisfaction. He had had no use for it. He had had no time to use it. So with success — no interest in it, no time to enjoy it; always driven, always driving to do something else, to catch up. Curious to think that once he would have sparkled over it, rejoiced in the money, thrilled in the triumph. Young Wriford would have — Young Wriford, that personality now immeasurably remote, whom once he had been. Why would Young Wriford have delighted? Ah, Young Wriford was happy. Why? What knew he, what possessed he, in those far distant years, that somehow had been lost, that he had thought, by breaking away and not caring for anything or anybody, to recover, that, now the experiment was over, showed itself more deeply lost than ever before? Where and how had that attribute of happiness — whatever it was — been dropped? . . .

Lo, he was back again where the oldest sea-captain living had found him and had interrupted him, the paper fallen on his knees, his eyes gazing blankly before him: was there some secret of happiness he had missed?

As he mused he was again disturbed — this time by the Matron. It was a Board day, she told him, and he was to go before the guardians at once. The guardians were sitting late and had reached his case; ordinarily it would not have come up till next fortnight; after receiving the Medical Officer's report they attended personally to all convalescent ward cases.

The Matron gave Mr. Wriford this information as she conducted him to the Board-room door. "It'll be

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good-bye," she said, smiling at him kindly as she left him — he was different from the generality of her patients. "It'll be good-bye. You're passed out of the C. W."

CHAPTER IV

CLURK FOR MR. MASTER

I

GUARDIANS sat at a long, green-covered table. Large plates of sandwiches and large cups of coffee were supporting them against the strain of their labours in sitting late, and they regarded Mr. Wriford with eyes that stared from above busily engaged mouths. A different class of men from the members of the Cottage Hospital Committee and, like the Matron, accustomed to a class of pauper different from Mr. Wriford.

His difference was advertised in his youth — a quality very much abhorred by the honest guardians as speaking to shocking idleness — and in the refinement of his voice and speech — a peculiarity that lent itself to banter and was used for such.

One addressed as Mr. Chairman first spoke him.

"Well, you've had a good fat thing out of us," said Mr. Chairman, himself presenting the appearance of having made a moderately fat thing out of his duties, and speaking with one half of a large sandwich in his hand and the other half in his mouth. "Best part of three months' board and lodging in slap-up style. Number One. Diet and luxuries ad lib. What are you going to do about it? Are you going to pay for it?"

This was obviously a very humorous remark to make

to a pauper, and it received at once the gratifying tribute of large sandwichy grins and chuckles all round the table.

"I call upon Mr. Chairman," said one grin, "to tell this gentleman exactly what he has cost the parish in pounds, shillings and pence sterling."

This, by its reception, was equally humourous, one Guardian being so overcome by the wit of "gentleman" and "sterling" as to choke over his coffee and rise and expectorate in the fire.

"Sixteen, fourteen, six," said Mr. Chairman, "and as a point of order I call Mr. Master's attention to the fact that another time a spittoon had better be provided for the gentleman as has just needed the use of one."

The Workhouse Master who stood beside Mr. Chairman having contributed obsequiously to the merriment and banter aroused by this sparkle of humour, Mr. Chairman loudly called the meeting to order and again taxed Mr. Wriford with his debt to the parish.

"Sixteen, fourteen, six," said Mr. Chairman. "Can you pay it? I lay you've never earned so much money in all your life, so now then?"

In the days of wild escapade with Mr. Puddlebox, Mr. Wriford's thoughts — all in some form of passion — worked very rapidly. Now, as though they had learnt their gait from his slow revolving of his ceaseless question, they worked very slowly; and when he spoke he spoke very slowly. His mind went slowly to the account he had been reading of himself in the illustrated paper. He thought of the large sum that awaited him in his agent's hands, and he thought, with an impulse of the furious Puddlebox days, of the glorious sensation he would arouse by bellowing at these uncouth creatures:

"Earned so much! Well, I daresay I could buy up the lot of you, you ugly-looking lot of pigs, and have as much over again!" But he allowed the impulse to drift away. He had done that sort of thing: to what profit? He might do it. He might follow it up by stampeding about the room, hurling sandwiches at Guardians and shouting with laughter at the amazement and confusion while he did as much damage as he could before he was overpowered. What profit? The excitement would pass and be over. It would lead to nothing that would satisfy him. It would bring him nowhere that would rest him. He had done that sort of thing. It attracted him no more. Should he answer them seriously — explain who he was, request that a telegram should be sent to his agent, go back to his old life, take up the success that awaited him? What profit? That, too, he had tried. That, too, would lead him nowhere, bring him no nearer to his only desire. He imagined himself back in London, back in his own place once more, enjoying the comforts he had earned, travelling, amusing himself, settling to work again. What profit? Enjoyment! Amusement! He would find none. They and all that they meant lay hidden beneath some secret of life that must be found ere ever he could touch them — something for which always and always he would be searching, something he had missed. He had tried it. It had no attraction for him: rather it had a thousand explanations, worries, demands, at whose very thought he shuddered. Let him drift. Let him go wheresoever any chance tide might take him. Let him be alone to think, to think, and haply to discover.

"Well?" said Mr. Chairman.

"If you think I'm fit to go, I'll go at once," said Mr.

Wriford. "I'm very grateful for all that has been done for me."

Mr. Chairman reckoned that he ought to be. "Where'll you go?" demanded Mr. Chairman.

"Anywhere."

"What'll you do?"

"I don't know."

Mr. Chairman thumped the table in expression of one of the many trials that Guardians had to bear. "What's the sense o' that talk?" demanded Mr. Chairman. "Anywhere! Don't know! That's the way with all you chaps. Get outside and pretend you're starving and pitch a fine tale about being turned out and get rate-payers jawing or magistrates preachin' us a lecture. We've been there before, my beauty."

Chorus of endorsement from fellow-Guardians who growl angrily at Mr. Wriford as though they had indeed been there before and saw in Mr. Wriford the visible embodiment of their misfortune.

"Well, what?" said Mr. Wriford helplessly.

Mr. Chairman with another thump, and as though he had never asked a question throughout the proceedings, announced that that was for him to say. Mr. Master would find a bed for him and let him take jolly good care that he earned it."

"I'll be very glad to work," said Mr. Wriford.

Mr. Chairman looked at him contemptuously. "Plucky lot you can do, I expect!" said Mr. Chairman.

"I can do clerical work," said Mr. Wriford. "Anything in the way of writing or figures. I'm accustomed to that. If there's anything like that until I'm fit to go —" A sudden faintness overcame him. The room was very hot, and the standing and the questioning,

while all the time he was thinking of something else, possessed him, in his weak state, with a sudden giddiness. He smiled weakly and said "I'm sorry" and sat down abruptly on a chair that fortunately was close to him.

Mr. Master bent over Mr. Chairman and whispered obsequiously on a subject in which the words "our clurk" were frequently to be heard. "Gentlemen," said Mr. Chairman, "Mr. Master suggests that we might leave over the business of appointing a boy-clurk till our next meeting, while he sees if this man can give him any help. I want to get home to my supper, and I expect you do. Agreed, gentlemen?"

"Agreed," chorused the gentlemen, throwing down pens and taking up new sandwiches with the air of men who had performed enormous labours and were virtuously happy to be rid of them.

Mr. Chairman nodded at Mr. Master. "Keep his nose to it," said Mr. Chairman.

"This way," said Mr. Master to Mr. Wriford; and Mr. Wriford got slowly to his feet and followed him slowly through a door he held ajar.

II

Stronger now. Increasingly stronger as day succeeded day and the year came more strongly into her own. Only waiting a little more strength, so he believed, to betake himself from Pendra Workhouse and go—anywhere. Actually, as the event that did at last prompt him to go might have told him, it was a reason, a shaking-up, a stirring of his normal round, rather than sufficient strength that he awaited. In a numbed and

listless and detached way he was not uncomfortable in the new circumstances to which he was introduced after the Board-room interview. The Master, removed from the obsequious habit that he wore when before the Guardians, showed himself not unkindly. He conceived rather a liking for Mr. Wriford. Mr. Wriford performed for him the duties of boy-“clurk” in a manner that was of the greatest assistance to him. He reported very favourably on the matter to the Guardians; and when Mr. Wriford spoke of taking his discharge put forward a proposition to which the Guardians found it convenient to consent. Why lose this inmate of such valuable clurkly accomplishments? Why not offer him his railway fare home, wherever in reason that might be, if he stayed, say a month, and continued to assist the Master? At the end of that time he might be offered a very few shillings a week to continue further — if wanted. Mr. Master carried the proposition to Mr. Wriford. Mr. Wriford in a numbed, listless and detached way said: “All right, yes.” He was taken from the workhouse ward where till then he had slept and accommodated in a tiny box-room in the Master’s quarters. His nose was kept at it, as Mr. Master had been desired. His duties were capable of extension in many directions. That he fulfilled them in a numbed, listless, and detached fashion was none to the worse in that he accepted them without complaint whatever they might be. “I call him: ‘All right, yes,’” Mr. Master obsequiously told the Guardians. “That’s about all ever he says. But he does it a heap. Look at the way the stores are entered up. I’ve had him checking them all this week.”

CHAPTER V

MAINTOP HAIL FOR THE CAPTAIN

I

THE event that at last aroused Mr. Wriford and took him far from Pendra was supplied by the oldest sea-captain living on that distinguished personage's birthday. The oldest sea-captain living "went a bit in his legs" shortly after Mr. Wriford had entered upon the new phase of his duties. He was provided with a wheeled-chair, and Mr. Wriford found him seated in this in the grounds one day, abandoned by his cronies and weeping softly over his beloved portograph in the Daily Mirror paper. He wept, he told Mr. Wriford, because none of them blokes ever took any notice of him now. The finer weather kept the blokes largely out of doors, and they would go off and leave him. "I'm the oldest sea-captain living, Matey," said he in a culminating wail, "and I've got me portograph in the Daily Mirror paper. It's cruel on me. 'Ave a look at it, Matey."

Mr. Wriford pushed the wheeled-chair and the oldest sea-captain living about the grounds all that afternoon, and the task became thereafter a part of his daily occupation. It was not a duty. It merely became a habit. The face of the oldest sea-captain living would light up enormously when he saw Mr. Wriford approaching, and

he would thank him affectionately when each voyage in the wheeled-chair was done, but Mr. Wriford was never actively conscious of finding pleasure in the old man's gratitude. He never conversed with him during their outings — and had no need to converse. The oldest sea-captain living did all the talking, chattering garrulously and with the wandering of a fading old mind of his ships, his voyages, and his adventures, and ecstatically happy so to chatter without response. He was born in Ipswich, he told Mr. Wriford, and he was married in Ipswich and had had a rare little house in Ipswich and had buried his wife in Ipswich. Whenever, in his chattering, he was not at sea he was at Ipswich, and the reiteration of the word gradually wormed a place into Mr. Wriford's mind, creeping in by persistent thrusts and digs through the web and mist of his own thoughts which, as he revolved them, enveloped him numbed, listless, detached from the oldest sea-captain living and his chattering as from all else that surrounded him in the workhouse.

II

Yet an event proved that not only the name Ipswich but some feeling for this its famous son, some sense of happiness in the hours devoted to the wheeled-chair, also had found place in his mind. A birthday of the oldest sea-captain living brought the event. In celebration of the occasion the oldest sea-captain living was permitted to give a little tea-party in the convalescent ward. Some dainties were provided and with them just the tiniest little drop of something in the oldest sea-captain's tea. Enormously exhilarated, the

oldest sea-captain living obtained of the Matron permission to send a special request to Mr. Wriford to attend the festivities, and enormously exhilarated he showed himself when Mr. Wriford came. Flushed and excited he sat at the head of the table in full possession once more of the ear of his companions and making up for previous isolation by chattering tremendously of his exploits. Roused to immense heights by his sudden popularity and by virtue of the little drop of something in his tea, he gave at intervals, to the great delight of the assembly, an example of how he used to hail the maintop in foul weather when master of his own ship. With almost equal force of lungs he hailed Mr. Wriford when Mr. Wriford appeared.

"Hallo, Matey!" hailed the oldest sea-captain living. "Ahoy, Matey! Ahoy!"

No doubt about the affection and gratitude that Matey had aroused in him by perambulation of the wheeled-chair. Even Mr. Wriford himself was touched and aroused and caused to smile by the flushed and beaming countenance that called him to a seat beside him and by the pressure of the trembling hands that grasped his own and drew him to a chair. "Matey!" cried the oldest sea-captain living, "I'm ninety-nine, and I can hail the maintop fit to make the roof come down. Listen to me, Matey."

Gurgles of anticipation all round the table. "Now this is to be the last time, Father," said the Matron, coming to them. "There's too much noise here, and you'll do yourself an injury if you're not careful. The last time, now!"

It was the last time.

The oldest sea-captain living took an excited sip at

his cup of tea with the little drop of something in it, then caught at Mr. Wriford's shoulder, and drew himself to his full height in his chair. His other hand he put trumpet shape to his lips.

"Maintop! ahoy, there!" trumpeted the oldest sea-captain living. He inspired a long, wheezing breath. Mr. Wriford could feel the hand clutching on his shoulder. "Ahoy! Maintop, ahoo! Ahoy! A—!"

The fingers on Mr. Wriford's shoulder bit into his flesh as though there was returned to them all the vigour that had been theirs when first that voice bawled along a deck. So sharp, so fierce the pinch that he looked up startled. Startled also the other faces along the table, and startled the Matron, frightened and running forward. They saw what he saw — saw the blood well out horribly upon the oldest sea-captain's mouth, felt the grip relax, and saw him crash horribly upon the tea-cups.

Lift him away. Call the doctor. Call the doctor. Lift him, lay him here. Send away those gibbering, frightened old men huddling about him. Lay him here. Wipe those poor old lips. "There, Father, there!" What does he want? What is it he wants? What is he trying to say? Listen, bend close. "Matey, Matey!" Mr. Wriford jumps up from kneeling beside him and runs to the table; snatches up a grimy newspaper-cutting lying there and brings it to the oldest sea-captain living; puts it in his fingers and sees the fingers close upon it and sees the glazing eyes light up with great happiness. "Matey!" Very faintly, scarcely to be heard. "Matey!" He is thanking him. "Matey! Gor bless yer, Matey!" There is a bursting feeling in

Mr. Wriford's heart. Words come choking out of it. "Captain! Captain! You've got your photograph. Take you out for a ride to-morrow, Captain! Better now? Captain!" Captain's lips are moving. He is thanking him. Ay, with his soundless lips thanking, with his spirit answering his call from the main-top. . . .

"Poor old Father!" says Matron, rising from her knees.

Captain has answered.

III

Attendants carry the body to an adjoining room. Mr. Wriford follows it and stays by it. He is permitted to stay and stays while darkness gathers. What now? for now a change again. To push the wheeled-chair had been a habit, not a pleasure. Was that sure? Why is it pain to think to-morrow will not bring that lighting of those eyes, that chatter of those lips? Why in his heart that bursting swell a while ago? Why swells it now as darkness shrouds that poor old form? Had he without knowing it been happy in that task? without knowing it, come near then to something in life that he had missed? What now? Well, now he would go away. What here? Ah, in the dusk that masses all about the room, bend close and peer and ask again. What here? Look, those stiff fingers clutch that portograph. Look, those stained lips are smiling, smiling. He is happy. He was always happy when Matey came. Has he taken happiness with him? Was it within grasp and not recognised and now missed again — gone?

IV

Mr. Wriford takes his discharge. Guardians, holding to their word, take him his railway ticket. The Master is genuinely sorry. When at last, on the night of the oldest sea-captain's death, he finds Mr. Wriford determined, "Well, the Guardians will be sitting to-morrow," he says. "I'll tell 'em. They'll take your ticket for you. Where to?"

He has to repeat the question. Fresh from the death-bed and its new turn to the old thoughts, Mr. Wriford is even more than commonly absent and bemused. "Where to?" repeats Mr. Master. "Where's your friends you want to go to?"

Mr. Wriford takes the first place that comes into his head. Very naturally it is the name that has edged a place in his mind by repeated reiteration during perambulation of the wheeled-chair.

"Ipswich," says Mr. Wriford.

Guardians think it a devil of a big fare to pay and grumble a bit. On the one hand, however, this inmate has saved a boy-"clurk's" wages now for some considerable period: on the other, Ipswich will take him hundreds of miles beyond danger of starving and falling back on their hands and making a general nuisance of himself.

"Very well, Ipswich," says Mr. Chairman. "Agreed, gentlemen?" Agreed. "Take the ticket yourself, Mr. Master," says Mr. Chairman, "and see him into the train. None of his larks, you know!"

V

So it is done. On the day previous to his departure Mr. Wriford has a holiday from Mr. Master and walks over to Port Rannock, to the churchyard. He has identified while in the Infirmary the list of clothes and pathetic oddments — bundle of thirty-five coppers among them, paid in towards expenses of burial — found on the body of Mr. Puddlebox and has been told the grave lies just in the corner as you enter. It is just a grass-grown mound, nameless, that he finds. An old man who seems to be the sexton confirms his question. Yes, that was a stranger found drowned back in November. The last burial here. Long-lived place, Port Rannock.

Mr. Wriford stands a long while beside it — thinking. How go you now, Puddlebox? If you stood here — “O all ye graves, bless ye the Lord, praise Him —” That would be your way. How go you now? Puddlebox — that wasn’t your real name, was it? — Puddlebox, why did you do it? Puddlebox, how did you do it? Puddlebox, I’m going off again. I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’m just going. I wish to God — I’d give anything, anything, to have you with me again. You can’t. Well, how go you now? Can you think of me? Have you found what I can’t find — what I’ve missed? Ah, it was always yours. You were always happy. How? Why? Down you went, down and drowned for me, for me! Down without even good-bye. Why? How? . . .

The sexton, locking up his churchyard, turned Mr.

Wriford out. "Well, good-bye," said Mr. Wriford to the nameless mound and carried his thoughts and his questions back along the road to the Workhouse. Ah, carried them further and very long. With him, now centring about Mr. Puddlebox and now about the perplexity of the something touched and something lost again in the oldest sea-captain living, during the long journey to London; with him again towards Ipswich.

VI

He crossed London by the Underground Railway. He did not want to see London. The second part of his journey, in the Ipswich train, was made in a crowded carriage, amid much staring and much chatter. A long wait was made at a station. Why Ipswich? And what then? Well, what did that matter? But why stay stifled up in here? He got up and left the compartment and passing out of the station among a crowd of passengers gave up his ticket without being questioned on it. Evening was falling. He neither asked nor cared where he was. Only those thoughts, those questions that had come with him in the train, concerned him, and pursuing them, he followed a road that took him through the considerable town in which he found himself and into the country beyond it. The month was May, the night, as presently it drew about him, warm and gentle. A hedgeside invited him, and he sat down and after a little while lay back. He did not trouble to make himself comfortable. There was nothing he wanted. There was only one thought into which all the other thoughts shaped: was there some secret of happiness he had missed?



BOOK FIVE

ONE OF THE BRIGHT ONES



BOOK FIVE

ONE OF THE BRIGHT ONES

CHAPTER I

IN A FIELD

I

SANDWICHES, supplied in liberal manner by Mr. Master and not touched on the railway journey, sufficed Mr. Wriford's needs through the following day. He tramped aimlessly the greater part of the time. Evening again provided him with a bed by the roadside. It was the next morning, to which he awoke feeling cold and feeling ill, that aroused him to his first thoughts of his present situation. He clearly must do something; but he had only negative ideas as to what it should be. Negative, as that, in passing a farm, it crossed his mind to apply for work as had been the practice with Mr. Puddlebox. But he recalled the nature of that work and was at once informed that he was now completely unfitted for it. He had been very strong then. He felt very weak now. He had then been extraordinarily vigorous and violent in spirit, and his spirit's violence had led him to delight in exercising his body at manual labour. Now he felt very weary and submissive in

mind; and that feeling of submission was reflected in extreme lassitude of his limbs. It came back to this — and at once he was returned again to his mental searching — that then there seemed object and relief in taxing himself arduously: now he had proved that trial and knew that no object lay beyond it, that no relief would ever now be contained in it. And in any event he was not capable of it: he was weak, weak; he felt very ill.

But something must be done. Let him determine how he stood; and with this thought he began for the thousandth time to rehearse his life as he had lived it. One of the lucky ones: he had been that: it had driven him into the river. One of the free: that also he now had been. Those months with Puddlebox he had cared for nothing and for nobody: recked nothing whether he lived or died. He had worked with his hands as in the London days he had imagined happiness lay in working. He had attained in brimming fulness all that in the London days he had madly desired. It had brought him where now he was — to knowledge that there was something in life he had missed, and to baffled, to bewildered ignorance what it might be or in what manner of living it might be found. Well, let him drag on. Just to drag on was now the best that he could do. Let life take him and do with him just whatsoever it pleased. Let him be lost, be lost, to all who knew him and to all and everything he knew. Let him a second time start life afresh, and this time not attack it as in the wild Puddlebox days he had attacked it, but be washed by it any whither it pleased, stranded somewhere and permitted to die perhaps, perhaps have disclosed to him, and be allowed to seize, whatever it might be that

somehow, somehow, somewhere, somewhere, he had missed.

Thus, as aimlessly he wandered, his thoughts took the form of plans or resolutions, yet were not resolutions in any binding sense. They drifted formlessly through his mind as snatches of conversation, carried on in a crowded apartment, will drift through a mind preoccupied with some idea; or they drifted through him as snow at its first fall will for long drift over and seem to leave untouched any stone that rises above the surface of the ground. He was preoccupied with his own ceaseless questioning. He was preoccupied with helpless and hopeless sense of helplessness and hopelessness. There was something that others found that gave them peace and gave them happiness, that he had missed, that he knew not where he had missed or where to begin to find.

All of plan or resolution that in any way settled upon this deeper brooding was that somehow he must find something to do. In the midst of his brooding he would jolt against realisation of that necessity, think aimlessly upon it for a little, then lose it again. Slowly it permeated his mind. Evening brought him to the outskirts of a small town; and at a house in a by-street where "Beds for Single Men" were offered, and where he listlessly turned in, the matter of being called upon for the price of a lodging shook him to greater concentration upon his resources. He found that, by Mr. Master's carelessness or kindness, he had been left with a trifle of change over the money given him to make his way across town when he broke his journey in London — elevenpence. He paid ninepence for his bed. In the morning there remained to him two coppers for food,

and he knew himself faint with protracted fasting. In a street of dingy shops he turned into a coffee-house. "Shave?" said a man in soiled white overalls, and he realised that he had mistaken the door and stepped into a barber's adjoining the refreshment shop. He was unshaven, and any work that he could do would demand a reasonably decent appearance. "Attend to you in a moment," said the soiled overalls, and Mr. Wriford dropped into a chair to await his pleasure. The ragged fragment of a local newspaper lay on a table beside him, and he took it up with some vague idea of discovering employment among the advertisements. That portion of the paper was missing. His eye was attracted by an odd surname, "Pennyquick," and when the barber called him and was operating on him he found himself listlessly reflecting upon what he had read of an inquest following the sudden death of the assistant-master at Tower House School, chief evidence given by Mr. Pennyquick, headmaster.

A penny was the price of his shave. He took his penny that remained into the adjoining coffee-shop and obtained with it a large mug of cocoa. "Three ha'pence with a slice of bread and butter," said the woman at the counter, pushing the cocoa towards him. "Don't you want nothing to eat?"

Her tone and the look she gave him were kindly. "I want it," said Mr. Wriford significantly.

"You look like it," said the woman. "There!" and slid him a hunk of dry bread.

He tried to thank her. He felt strangely overcome by her kindness. Tears of weakness sprang to his eyes; but no words to his mouth. "That's all right," she said. "You're fair starved by the look of you."

He puzzled as he finished his meal, and as he wandered out and up the street again, to know why he had been so touched by the woman's action. He found himself feeling towards her that same swelling in his heart as when the oldest sea-captain living with stained lips had whispered: "Matey! Matey!"

Was there something in life that he had missed? What in the name of God had that to do with being given a piece of bread?

II

He found himself late in the afternoon reaching the end of a deserted road of widely detached villas. The last house carried on its gate a very dingy brass plate.

TOWER HOUSE SCHOOL

JAMES PENNYQUICK, B. A.

Pennyquick? Pennyquick? It was the name that had caught his attention in the paper at the barber's. What had he read about it? He trailed on a few steps and remembered the inquest on the assistant-master, and stopped, and stared.

A rough field lay beyond the house. It was separated from the road by barbed-wire fencing which trailed between dejected-looking poles that at one time had supported it but now bowed towards the ground in various angles of collapse. Within the field were pitched at intervals decayed cricket stumps set in a wide circle, and there stood about dejectedly in this circle dejected-looking boys to the number of eighteen or twenty. At intervals, as Mr. Wriford stood and watched, the boys

stirred into a dejected activity which gave them the appearance of being engaged in a game of rounders. A gentleman, wearing on his head a dejected-looking mortar-board without a tassel, and beneath it untidy black garments of semi-clerical appearance, imparted these intervals of activity to the boys. He paced the field in a series of short turns near the house, hands behind his back, head bent, and, as Mr. Wriford could see, sucking in the cheeks of a coarse-looking face surrounded by scrubby whiskers of red hair. Every now and then he would throw up his head towards the dejected-looking boys and bawl "PLAY UP!" whereupon the dejected-looking boys would give momentary attention to their game.

Mr. Wriford stepped over the trailing wire and approached the maker of this invigorating call. "Excuse me," said Mr. Wriford, come within speaking distance. "Are you Mr. Pennyquick?"

Halted in his pacing at sight of Mr. Wriford, the gentleman thus addressed awaited him with lowered head and lowering gaze much as a bull might regard the first movements of an intruder. He sucked more rapidly at his cheeks as Mr. Wriford came near, and for a space sucked and fiercely stared after receiving the question.

"Well, what if I am?" he then returned. His voice was extraordinarily harsh, and he came forward a step that brought his face close to Mr. Wriford's and stared more threateningly than before. His eyes were dull and heavily bloodshot, and there went with the sucking at his cheeks a nervous agitation that seemed to possess his neck and all his joints. "What if I am?" he demanded again, and his words discharged a reek com-

municative of the fact that, whoever he was, abstinence from alcohol was not among his moral principles.

"By any chance," said Mr. Wriford, "do you happen to want an assistant-master?"

"I don't want you."

"I thought you might want temporary assistance."

He was stared at a moment from the clouded eyes. Then, in another volume of the fierce breath, "Well, you thought wrong!" he was told. "Now!"

"Very well," said Mr. Wriford and turned away.

He went a dozen paces towards the road. There seized him as he turned and as he walked away a sudden realisation of his case, a sudden panic at his plight, a sudden desperation to cling on to what he believed offered here. He must find something to do. There could be no concealment, no peace for him while he wandered outcast and penniless. That way lay what most he feared. He would be found wandering or found collapsed, and questions would be asked him and explanations demanded of him. That terrified him. He could not face that. Whatever else happened he must be left alone. He must find something to do that would hide him — give him occupation enough to earn him food and shelter and leave him to himself to think.

He turned and went back desperately. The man he believed to be Mr. Pennyquick was standing staring after him and waited staring as he came on.

"Look here," said Mr. Wriford desperately. "Look here, Mr. Pennyquick. I know you think it strange my coming to you like this. But I heard, I heard in the town, that you wanted an assistant-master. If you don't —"

"I've told you," said Mr. Pennyquick, admitting

the personality by not denying it, "I've told you I don't want you. Now!"

"If you don't," said Mr. Wriford, unheeding the rebuff, more desperate by reason of it, "if you don't, there's an end of it. But if you want temporary help — temporary, a day, or a week — I can do it for you."

"Do what?" demanded Mr. Pennyquick.

"I can teach," said Mr. Wriford. There was sign of relenting in Mr. Pennyquick's question, and Mr. Wriford took it up eagerly. "I can teach," he repeated.

"What can you teach?"

"I can teach all the ordinary subjects."

"I'm getting a University man," said Mr. Pennyquick.

"Temporarily," Mr. Wriford urged. As every passage of their conversation brought him nearer this sudden chance or threw him further from it, his panic at its failure, and what must happen, then increased desperately. "Temporarily," he urged. "I've had a public-school education."

"Yes, you look it!" said Mr. Pennyquick, and laughed.

"English subjects," cried Mr. Wriford. "Latin, mathematics. I can do it if you want it."

Mr. Pennyquick glanced over his shoulder at his dejected-looking boys, then stared back again at Mr. Wriford and began to speak with more consideration and less fierceness. "I'm not saying," said Mr. Pennyquick, "that I don't want temmo—temmer—PLAY UP! Tem-po-rary assistance. I do. I'm very ill. I'm shaken all to bits. I ought to be in bed. What I'm saying is I don't want you. I don't know anything about you.

I've got the reputation of my school to consider. That's what I'm saying to you."

Dizziness began to overtake Mr. Wriford — the field to rock in long swells, Mr. Pennyquick by turns to recede and advance, swell and diminish. He felt himself upon the verge of breaking down, wringing his hands in his extremity and staggering away. But where? Where? "Temporarily," he pleaded. "Temporarily."

"You might drink for all I know," said Mr. Pennyquick, pronouncing this possibility as if consumed with an unnatural horror of it.

"I don't drink."

"How do I know that?"

Mr. Wriford cried frantically: "It's only temporarily! If I drink, if I'm not suitable, you can stop it in a moment."

"No notice?" said Mr. Pennyquick.

"No — no notice. Temporarily — it's only temporarily. That'll be understood."

"Well, if no notice is understood I'll take the risk — for a week, while I'm getting a man. I'll give you fifteen shillings. No, I won't. I'll give you twelve. I'll give you twelve shillings, and if I have to sack you before the week's out — well, you just go. That's understood?"

"Thank you," Mr. Wriford said. The field was spinning now. He could think of nothing else to say.

"Thank you."

"Be here at nine to-morrow," said Mr. Pennyquick. "Just before nine," and he turned away and shouted to his boys: "Stop now! Come in now!"

"But —" said Mr. Wriford. "But — but —" He

was trying for words to frame his difficulty. "But — do I live in?"

"Live in!" cried Mr. Pennyquick. "I'm taking risks enough having you at all! Live in! Stop now. Come in now!" and he walked away towards the house.

CHAPTER II

IN A PARLOUR

I

LIGHTS in all the windows and in the street lamps as Mr. Wriford regained the town. Night approaching — and he terrified of its approach. Little chill was in the air, yet as he walked he trembled and his teeth chattered. He was shaken and acutely distressed by revulsion of the effort to cling on and achieve his purpose against Mr. Pennyquick's domineering savagery. He was worse shaken and worse distressed by mounting continuance of the panic at his plight that had driven him to the interview. That plight and to what it might lead had suddenly been revealed to him as he walked away after the first rebuff. Now it utterly consumed him. He shrunk from the gaze of passers-by. He avoided with more than the fear of an evil-doer the police constables who here and there were to be seen. His urgent desire was concealment, to be left alone, to be quiet. His fear was to be apprehended, found destitute, questioned, interfered with. Questioning: that was his terror; solitude: that was his want. He wanted to hide. He wanted to hide from every sort of connection with what in two different phases he had lived through, and in each come only to misery. He told himself that if, in obedience to his bodily desires — his hunger, his extreme physical wretchedness — he were

somehow to get in communication with London and enjoy the money and the place that waited him there — that would be the very quick of intolerable meeting with his old self again. Unthinkable that! If his bodily desires — his faintness, his extreme exhaustion — overcame him, there would be meeting the old life in guise of explanations, of dependence again in infirmary or workhouse. No, he must somehow be alone; he must somehow live where none should interfere with him and where he might on the one hand be occupied and on the other be able to sit aside from all who knew him or might bother him, and thus pursue his quest: was there some secret of happiness in life that he had missed? These bodily miseries would somehow, somewhere, be accommodated or would kill him: this mental searching — ever?

There was upon him accumulation of wretchedness such as in all his wretchedness of his accursed life he never had endured. At its worst in the old days, the days of being one of the lucky ones, there had shone like a lamp to one lost in darkness the belief that if he could get out of it all he would end it all. Ah, God, God, he had escaped it and was in worse condition for his escape! The belief had been tested — the belief was gone. In the wild Puddlebox days he had beaten off wretchedness with violence of his hands and of his body, believing that it ever could thus be beaten. God, it had beaten him, never again in that deluded spirit could be faced. In the infirmary he had begun his wondering after something in life that he had missed. Lo, here was he come out to find it, and Christ! it was not, and Christ! he might not now so much as sit and rest and ponder it.

He felt himself hunted. He felt every eye turned

upon him within whose range he came; every hand tingling suddenly to clutch him and stop him; every voice about to cry: "Here, you! You, I say! What are you doing? Where do you live? Who are you?"

He felt himself staggering from his dreadful faintness and thereby conspicuous. Thrice as he stumbled round any corners that he met he found himself passing a constable who each time more closely stared. He took another turning. It showed him again that same policeman at the end of the street. He dared not turn back. That would be flight, his disordered mind told him, and he be followed. He dared not go on. There was a little shop against where he stood. Its lighted window displayed an array of gas-brackets, a variety of glass chimneys and globes for lamps and gas, some coils of lead piping, and in either corner a wash-basin fitted with taps. There was inscribed over this shop

HY. BICKERS, CERT. PLUMBER

and attached to a pendent gas bracket within the window was a card with the announcement:

LODGER TAKEN

Mr. Wriford made a great effort to steady himself; steadied his shaking hand to press down the latch; and to the very loud jangle of an overhead bell entered the tiny shop that the door disclosed.

II

There was sound of conversation and the clatter of plates from a brightly-lit inner parlour. Mr. Wriford

heard a voice say: "I'll go, Essie, dear," and there came out to him a nice-looking little old woman, white-haired and silvery-hued, rather lined and worn, yet radiating from her face a noticeable happiness, as though there was some secret joy she had, who smiled at him in pleasant inquiry.

"I'm looking for a lodging," said Mr. Wriford.

At her entry she had left the parlour door open behind her, and at Mr. Wriford's words there came to him through it a bright girlish voice which said: "There, now! Jus' what I was saying! Isn't that funny, though! Let's have a laugh!" and with it, as though Mr. Wriford's statement had conveyed the jolliest joke in the world, the merriest possible ring of laughter.

The woman smiled at Mr. Wriford; and there was in the laugh something so infectious as to make him, despite his wretchedness, smile in response. She went back to the door and closed it. "That's our Essie," she said, speaking as though Mr. Wriford in common with everybody else must know who Essie was. "She's such a bright one, our Essie!" The secret happiness that seemed to lie behind her years and behind the lines of her face shone strongly as she spoke. One might guess that "Our Essie" was it. Then she answered Mr. Wriford's statement. "Well, we've got a very nice bedroom," she told him. "Would you like to see it?"

"I'm sure it's nice," said Mr. Wriford. His voice, that he had tried to strengthen for this interview, for some ridiculous reason trembled as he spoke. The reason lay somewhere in the woman's motherly face and in her happy gleaming. He felt himself stupidly affected just as he had been affected — recurrence of the

sensation brought the scenes before his eyes — by the last appeal to him of the oldest sea-captain living, and by the kindly action of the woman in the coffee-shop who had given him a piece of bread early that morning. "I'm sure it's nice," he said again, repeating the words to correct the stupid break in his voice. "Would you tell me the price?"

"Won't you sit down?" said the woman. "You do look that tired!"

He murmured some kind of thanks and dropped into a chair that stood by the counter.

She looked at him very compassionately before she answered his question. "Tiring work looking for lodgings," she said.

He nodded — very faint, very wretched, very vexed with himself at that stupid swelling from his heart to his throat that forbade him speech.

"Would you be living in?" he was asked.

"I think I should be out all day."

"Jus' breakfast and supper? That's the usual, of course, isn't it? And full Sundays. That would be twelve shillings."

Twelve shillings was to be his wage from Mr. Pennyquick. He could not spend it all.

"I couldn't pay it," said Mr. Wriford and caught at the counter to assist himself to rise.

"Well, I am sorry, I'm sure," said the woman, and she added: "Hadn't you better rest a little?"

His difficulty in rising warned him that if he did get up he might be unable to stand. "I will, just a moment," he told her, "if you don't mind. It's very kind of you. I've had rather a long day."

She had said she was sorry, and she stood looking at

him as though she were genuinely grieved and more than a little disturbed in mind. "How much could you pay?" she asked.

"I could pay ten."

"And when might you want to begin?"

"Now."

"Would it be for long?"

"I can't say. I don't think it would."

She said briskly, as though her obvious disturbance of mind had dictated a sudden course, "Look here, jus' wait a minute, will you?" and went into the parlour, closing the door behind her.

Murmur of voices.

"You know," she said, coming back to him, "if it was likely to be regular perhaps we could arrange ten shillings. But not knowing, you see, that's awkward. We like our lodger more to be one of us like. We don't want the jus' come and go sort. That's how it stands, you see. You couldn't say, I suppose?"

"It's very kind of you," said Mr. Wriford. "I'm afraid I can't. I'll tell you. I'm engaged with Mr. Pennyquick at Tower House School —"

"Oh, Mr. Pennyquick!"

"You know him, I expect?"

"Oh, I know Mr. Pennyquick," said the woman, and seemed to have some meaning in her tone.

"Well, it's only for a week, or by the week. I can't say how long."

He was given no reply to this. It was as if mention of Mr. Pennyquick's name placed him as very likely to be among the "come and go sort." "I had better be going, I think," he said, and this time got to his feet.

"Well, I am sorry," the woman said again. "I'm

sure I'm very sorry, and you know I can't say straight off where you'll get what you want for ten shillings. There's places, of course. But you know you don't look fit to go trudging round after them this time of night. Hadn't you better go just for the night somewhere? There's Mrs. Winter I think would take you for the night. She's at — "

Mr. Wriford went to the door. "You needn't trouble," he said weakly. "It can't be by the night. I can only pay at the end of the week."

The woman gave a little sound of dismay. "But — do you mean no money till then? "

He nodded. That was what he meant—and must face.

"But, dearie me, you won't find any will take you without deposit. They're very suspicious here, you know."

"Well," said Mr. Wriford. "Well — " and with fingers as helpless as his voice began to fumble at the latch.

"But where are you going? "

"This handle," he said. "It's rather stiff." He took his hand from it as she came round the counter to him, then immediately caught at it again and supported himself against it.

She saw the action and cried out in consternation. "Oh," she cried. "Why, you can't hardly stand, and going off nowhere! Why, you jus' can't. You'll have to stop."

He asked wearily: "Stop! How can I stop? "

"Why, ten shillings. That'll be all right. Our Essie, you know — "

He could say no more than "Thank you. Thank you."

"You'll come right along. We're just sitting down to supper. No, I'll just tell them first."

He effected speech again as, with her last words, she went to the parlour door. "But deposit," he said, and recalled the phrase she had used. "Aren't you suspicious?"

"Why, that can't be helped," she smiled back at him. "Our Essie, you know, she'd never forgive me if I sent you off like you are. Jus' sit down."

He had scarcely taken a seat when she was back again and calling him from the threshold of the open parlour door. "That's all right. Come right along. You didn't give your name, did you?"

"Wriford," and he reached her where she stood smiling.

She turned within and announced him: "Well, here's our lodger. That's Mr. Bickers."

A man of stature and of strength, once, this Hy. Bickers, Cert. Plumber. Bent now and stooping, but with something very strong, very confident in his face: lined and worn as his wife's, silvery as hers. Slightly whiskered, of white, otherwise clean shaven. A smoking-cap on his head. Little enough hair beneath it. In his face that same suggestion of a very happy secret happiness. "Expect you're tired," said Mr. Bickers and gave a warm hand-clasp.

"And that's our Essie."

A very cool, vigorous young hand, this time, that grasped Mr. Wriford's and shook it strongly. A slim, brown little thing, our Essie, eighteen perhaps, very pretty, with extraordinarily bright eyes; wearing a blue cotton dress with white spots.

"Pleased to meet you," said Essie.

III

Such a cheerful, jolly room, the parlour. Here was a round table set out for supper, and Essie bustling in and out of what appeared to be the kitchen, giving final touches and laying a fourth place. A great number of framed texts all round the walls, with two or three religious pictures, a highly coloured portrait of Queen Victoria and another of General Booth. A bright little fire burning, with an armchair of shining American cloth on each side of it, and a sofa and chairs, similarly covered, all with antimacassars, set around the room. A bookcase near the window, and near one armchair a little table carrying an immense Bible with other Bibles and prayer-books placed upon it. Some shells on the mantelpiece in front of an immense, gilt-framed mirror, and with them a great number of cups and saucers and vases all inscribed as "A present from " the place whence they were purchased.

Mr. Wriford sat on the sofa, silent, better already from the warmth and the fragrant savour from the kitchen; not less wretched though: somehow more wretched, somehow overcome and utterly consumed with that swelling feeling from his heart to his throat. Mr. Bickers sat in one of the armchairs, silent. Mrs. Bickers in the kitchen.

Mrs. Bickers appears. "Now Essie, dear, I'll dish up. You jus' look after the lodger, dear. I expect the lodger will like to wash his hands. Hot water, dear, and there's his bundle."

Essie comes out of the kitchen with a steaming jug

in one hand and a candle in the other, puts down the candle to tuck Mr. Wriford's parcel under her arm, and then takes it up again. "This way," says Essie and leads the way through another door and up a flight of very steep and very narrow stairs. "Aren't they steep, though?" says Essie over her shoulder. "We don't half want a lift!"

The stairs give onto a passage with doors leading off from the right, and the passage terminates in a door which Essie butts open with her knee, and here is a bedroom. "This is the lodger's room," says Essie, setting down the candle and then removing the jug from the basin and pouring out the water. "Course it don't look much jus' at present, not expecting you, you see. But I'll pop up after supper an' put it to rights. Find your way down, can't you? I'll get you a bit of soap out of my room to go on with." There is a second door to the bedroom, and Essie goes through it and returns with soap. "That's my room," says Essie. "I call this my dressing-room when we haven't got a lodger, jus' like as if I was a duchess," and she gives the bright laugh that Mr. Wriford had heard in the shop. "That's all right then. Bring the candle. That mark on the wall there's where a lodger left his candle burning all night. Oh, they're cautions, some of our lodgers! Don't be long."

IV

Most savoury and most welcome soup opens the supper. After it a shoulder of mutton, Essie doing all the helping and the carving and the running about. She sits opposite Mr. Wriford. Her eyes — there is

something quite extraordinarily bright about her eyes as he watches them. They are never still. They are for ever sparkling from this object to that; and wherever momentarily they rest he sees them sparkle anew and sees her soft lips twitch as though from where her eyes alight a hundred merry fancies run sparkling to her mind. Her eyes flicker over the dish of potatoes and rest there a moment, and there they are sparkling, and her mouth twitching, as though she is recalling comic passages in buying them or in cooking them, or perhaps it is their very appearance, grotesquely fat and helpless, heaped one upon the other, in which she sees something odd that tickles her. Most extraordinarily bright eyes, and with them always most funny little compressions of her lips, as if she is for ever tickled onto the very brink of breaking into laughter.

This at last, indeed, she does. Presence of the new lodger seems to throw a constraint about the table, and the meal is eaten almost to the end of the mutton course in complete silence. Very startling, therefore, when Essie suddenly drops her knife and fork with a clatter and leans back in her chair, eyes all agleam. "Oh, dear me!" cries Essie, as Mr. and Mrs. Bickers stare at her. "Oh, dear me! I'm very sorry, but just *munching* like this, you know, all of us, without speaking a word! Oh, dear!" and she uses the expression that Mr. Wriford had heard when he first spoke to Mrs. Bickers. "Oh, dear, let's have a laugh!"

Mrs. Bickers glances at Mr. Wriford and says reprovingly: "Oh, Essie!" But there is no help for it and no avoiding its infection. Essie puts back her head and goes into a ring of the brightest possible laughter, and Mrs. Bickers laughs at her, and Mr. Bickers laughs at

her, and even Mr. Wriford smiles; and thereafter Essie chatters without ceasing to her parents on an extraordinary variety of topics connected with what she has done or seen during the day, in every one of which she finds subject for amusement and many times declares of whatever it may be: "Oh, aren't they funny, though! Let's have a laugh!"

Mr. Wriford smiles when she laughs — impossible to avoid it. Otherwise he contributes nothing to the chatter. This strange, this kind and happy and generous ending to his day, acts upon him only in increasing sensation of that upward swelling from his heart to his throat that forbids him speech. He has the feeling that if he talks his voice will break in tears — of weakness, of wretchedness: nay, of worse than these — of their very apotheosis. There is happiness here. There is here, among these three, that which he is seeking, seeking and cannot find. They have found it: what is it then? It is all about them — shining in their faces, singing in their words. He is not of it. He is outside it. They are on the heights; he in the depths, the depths! Let him not speak, let him not speak! If he speaks he must sob and cry, get to his feet, while wondering they look at him, and stare at them, and break from them and go. If he so betrays himself he must cry at them: "What have you found? Why are you happy? This kills me, kills me, to sit here and watch you. Don't touch me. None of you touch me. Let me go. Just let me go."

They seem to see his plight. They smile encouragingly at him to draw him into their talk; Mr. Bickers, when the women are clearing away, offers him a new clay pipe and the tobacco jar. But they seem to understand. They accept without comment or offence the negation

of these advances which he gives only by shaking his head as they are made.

"Well, that's done!" says Essie, coming down from the lodger's room after the supper has been cleared away. "Bed made and everything nice and ready. One of the castors of the bed is shaky, Dad. You'll have to see to it in the morning. I can't think how I never noticed it till now. Oh, those lodgers! They're fair cautions!"

Mrs. Bickers smiles at Mr. Wriford. "Well, I expect you'd like to go straight to bed, wouldn't you now?"

Painful this distrust of his voice. He rises and manages: "Yes, I would."

"You'll be ever so much better in the morning after a good sleep. What about —" and Mrs. Bickers looks at her husband.

"It's our custom," says Mr. Bickers in his deep voice, "all to read a piece from the Bible before we go to bed — all that sleep under this roof. We'll do it now so you can get along. Essie, dear."

Essie puts chairs to the table, and then Bibles. The immense Bible for Mr. Bickers, one but a little smaller for Mrs. Bickers, and one for herself. "There's my Church-service for you," says Essie to Mr. Wriford. All the Bibles have a ribbon depending from them whereat they are opened, and Essie finds the place for Mr. Wriford. "Twenty-fourth Psalm," says Essie. "My fav'rit. Isn't it a short one, though!"

"We read in turn," says Mr. Bickers. He has one hand on the great Bible and stretches the other to Mrs. Bickers, who takes it and holds it. Mr. Wriford sits opposite them, then Essie, next her father on his other side and snuggling against him, and they begin.

Mr. Bickers, very deep and slow and reverent:

"The earth is the Lord's and all that therein is: the compass of the world and they that dwell therein."

Mrs. Bickers, very gently:

"For he hath founded it upon the seas, and prepared it upon the floods."

Mr. Wriford. He is trembling, trembling, trembling. They are waiting for him. They are looking at him. Round swings the room, around and around. Who is waiting? Who is looking? Others are here. He hears the oldest sea-captain living, plainly as if he stood before him in the room: "Matey! Matey!" He sees Mr Puddlebox, plainly as if he were here beside him. "Wedge in, boy; wedge in!" They are surely here. They are surely calling him. He is on the rock with the sea about him. He is in the little room with the figure on the bed. Darkness, darkness. Is this Puddlebox? Is this Captain? Is he by the sea? Is he by the bed? Round swings the darkness, around and around. He is not! He is here! He is here where happiness is. They are waiting for him. They are watching him. Wriford! Wriford! He tries to read the words that swim before his eyes. He must. They are very few. They are a question. He must! Trembling he gives voice:

"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord: or who shall rise up in his holy place?"

Essie, strong and clear and eager, emphasising the first word as though strongly and directly she answered him:

"Even he that hath clean hands, and a pure heart: and that hath not lift up his mind unto vanity, nor sworn to deceive his neighbour."

Mr. Bickers, as one that feels the words he reads, and is sure of them:

"He shall receive the blessing from the Lord: and righteousness from the God of his salvation."

Mrs. Bickers in gentle confirmation:

"This is the generation of them that seek him: even of them that seek thy face, O Jacob."

His turn again. He cannot! Let him get out of this! Let him away! This is not to be borne. Unendurable this. What are they reading? Why have they chosen these words. "Who shall ascend?" They know his misery, then! They know the depths that he is in! Hateful that they should know it, hateful, insufferable, horrible. They see his state and have chosen words that mean his state. He is exposed before them. Let him away! Let him get out of this! They shall not know! His turn. He cannot, cannot. They are watching. They are waiting. Do they see how his face is working? Do they see how he twists and twists his hands? His turn. Ah, ah, he is in the depths, the depths! He is physically, actually down, down — struggling, gasping, suffocating. All this room and these about him stand as it were above him — watching him, waiting for him, knowing his misery. He is sinking, sinking. He is in black and whirling darkness. There is shouting in his ears. Let him away! Let him go!

Some one says: "Essie, dear."

Essie — strong and loud and clear, with tremendous emphasis upon the first word as though her strong young voice performed its meaning:

"Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of glory shall come in."

He gets to his feet, overturning his chair. He stumbles away, with blind eyes, with groping hands.

"Not that door!" cries Essie and runs to him.

"Here's the door. Here's the stairs. Look, here's your candle."

He blunders up. He blunders to his room. He extinguishes the candle. Let him have the dark, the dark! He throws off his clothes, tearing them from him as though they were his agonies. God, if he could but tear these tortures so! He flings himself upon the bed and trembles there and clutches there and thrusts the sheet between his teeth to stay him crying aloud. Inchoate thoughts that rend him, rend him! Unmeaning cries that with the sheet he stifles. What, what consumes him now? He cannot name it. What tortures him? He does not know. Writhe, writhe in the bed; and now it is the sea, and now the Infirmary ward, and now the coffee-shop, and now the parlour. Ah, beat down, beat down these torments! Ah, sit up and stare into the darkness and rid the spirit, rid the mind, of all these shapes and scenes that press about the pillow. Has he slept? Is he sleeping? Why suffers he? What racks him? In God's name what? In pity, in pity what?

"Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of glory shall come in."

Ah, ah!

CHAPTER III

TRIAL OF MR. WRIFORD

I

HE had determined, writhing in those tortures of that night, at daybreak to get out of it. He had promised himself, striving to subdue his mental torments, that early morning, the house not yet astir, should see him up and begone. Sleep betrayed him his promises and his resolves. While he writhed and while he cried aloud to sleep to come and rest his fevered writhings, she would not be won. Towards morning she came to him. He awoke to find daylight, sounds about the house, escape impossible.

His reception at breakfast in the little parlour changed his intention. His reception made the desertion that now he intended immediately he could leave the house as impossible as, now he saw, escape at daybreak had been most base. He found in Mr. and Mrs. Bickers and in Essie not the smallest trace of recognition that his conduct upon the previous evening had been in the smallest degree remiss. He found them proving in innumerable little ways that, as Mrs. Bickers had told him, they liked their lodgers to be "one of us like." Mr. Bickers proposes to walk with him towards Tower House School in order to show him short cuts that will lessen the way by five minutes. Mrs. Bickers inquires

if she may go through his bundle to see if any buttons or any darnings are required. Overnight he had been made to put on a pair of Mr. Bickers' slippers. Essie has put a new lace in one of his boots because one, when she was polishing the boots, was "worn out a fair treat." How can he run away from them without paying them in face of such kindness and confidence as all this? "Glad you like bacon," says Essie, helping him generously from the steaming dish she brings from the kitchen; and says to her mother: "Haven't some of our lodgers bin fanciful, though? Oh, we haven't half had some cautions!" and her eyes sparkle and her lips twitch as though her merry mind is running over the entertainment that some of the cautions have given.

No, there can be no desertion of his duties here after this. They trust him. They accept him as "one of us like." Already he is indebted to them. Until the week is out he is penniless and unable to repay them. When his week is up he can thank them and pay them and go. Till then, at whatever cost — and he will stiffen himself for the future; he was ill and overwrought last night — he must stay and earn and settle for the week for which he is committed.

"Ready?" says Mr. Bickers. "Time we was moving now."

Yes, he is quite ready. Essie runs to the shop door to open it for them. Mrs. Bickers comes with them to see them off. Some cows are being driven down the street. Essie stops with hand on the door to watch them. "Now, Essie," says Mr. Bickers. Two cows lumber onto the pavement. Mr. Wriford sees Essie's eyes sparkling and her lips twitching as she watches.

Mr. Bickers again: "Now, Essie dear — Essie!"

But Essie still watches. "Oh, jus' look at them!" says Essie with a little squirm of her shoulders and then turns round: "Aren't cows funny, though? Let's have a laugh!"

There is nothing at all to laugh at that any of the waiting three can see — except at Essie. Essie laughs as though cows were indeed the very funniest things in the world, and her laugh is impossible of resistance. Mr. Bickers is smiling as they start down the street, and Mr. Wriford is smiling also.

"She's such a bright one, our Essie," says Mr. Bickers.

"You must be very fond of her," says Mr. Wriford — "You and Mrs. Bickers;" and Mr. Bickers replies simply: "Why, I reckon our Essie is all the world to us."

II

Mr. Wriford suits Mr. Pennyquick. Mr. Pennyquick, indeed, as Mr. Wriford finds, is suited by anybody and anything that permits him leisure in which to nurse his ailment. His ailment requires rest which he takes all day long on the sofa in his study; and his ailment requires divers cordials which he keeps handily within reach in long bottles under the sofa. He is an outdoor man, as he tells Mr. Wriford when Mr. Wriford comes into the study on some inquiry. He is all for the open air and for sports; he only missed a double Blue at Cambridge — Rugby football and cross-country running — through rank favouritism, and he can't bear to be seen taking physic. To look around his room, says he, you'd never think he was a regular drug-shop inside owing to these rotten doctors, would you?

Not a bottle of the muck to be seen anywhere. That's because, says he, his breath exuding the muck in pungent volumes, he hides the bottles through sheer sensitiveness. He's feeling a wee bit brighter this afternoon, thank goodness, and if Wriford, like a good chap, would just start the First Form in their Caesar he'll be in in about two ticks and take them over.

Poor fellow, he never does manage to get in in two ticks or in any more considerable circumference of the clock. Mr. Wriford, as he closes the study door, hears the chink of bottle and glass and knows that the open-air man will breathe no other air than that of his room until he is able to grip his malady sufficiently to stagger up to bed.

The trial week, indeed, is not many days old before Mr. Wriford obtains a pretty clear comprehension of the state of affairs at the Tower House and the reputation of its Headmaster. "Pennyquick! Whisky-quick, I call him," says Essie; and though her mother reproves this levity, and though ill-natured gossip has no exercise in the Bickers' establishment, even the cert. plumber and his wife admit that the school is not what it was, and speak of a time when there were forty or fifty boys and several resident masters. There are only twenty-four boys now — all boarders. There are no day-boarders. The town knows its Mr. Pennyquick; and the time cannot be far distant when the tradesmen in different parts of the county, now attracted by the past reputation of this "School for the Sons of Gentlemen," also will know him for what he is. Six boys left the Tower House at the end of the previous term; five are leaving at the end of this. They are sorry to go, Mr. Wriford finds, and at first rather wonders at

the fact. But the reason is clear before even the trial week is out. The reason is that these twenty-four young Sons of Gentlemen, dejected-looking as he had seen them at play when he accosted Mr. Pennyquick, are dejected also in spirit — morally abased, that is to say, partly as coming from homes too snobbish to commit them to the rough and tumble of local elementary or grammar schools, and partly as being received into the atmosphere emanated by their Headmaster at the Tower House. They like the school. It suits them, and therefore, wiser than they should be, they carry no tales to their parents. They like the school. They like the utter slackness and slovenliness of the place. There is no discipline. There is scarcely a pretence of education. They wash in the mornings not till after they are dressed, Mr. Wriford finds, and they do not appear to wash again all day. They are thoroughly afraid of Mr. Pennyquick, but he scarcely ever visits them, leaving them now entirely to Mr. Wriford as formerly he left them to Mr. Wriford's predecessors who seemed to have been much of a habit of mind and character with themselves. Domestic arrangements are looked after by Mr. Pennyquick's mother who is a little, frightened grey wisp of a woman with hands that shake like her son's, but shake for him and because of him, Mr. Wriford discovers, not as a result of similar ailment and remedy. She adores her son. She is terrified of him. She is terrified for him. She sees his livelihood and his manhood crumbling away, simultaneously and disastrously swift, and what she can do, by befoolment of parents in correspondence relative to her son's ill-health and their own son's happiness and success, by pathetic would-be befoolment of Mr.

Wriford on the same counts, and by lenient treatment of the pupils, that does she daily and hourly to avert the doom she sees.

III

Within the first days of the trial week Mr. Wriford's duties fall into a regular routine. This is his trial week, his temporary week, a week in which he comes to his duties overwrought, shaken, uncertain and, thus conditioned, is wretched in his performance of them. Shortly before nine he presents himself at Tower House. The boys are wandering dejectedly about the playground. He passes nervously through them — they do not raise their caps — and hides from them in the schoolroom till the hour strikes on a neighbouring church clock. Then Mr. Wriford rings a large hand-bell, and the boys drift in at their leisure and take their places on the benches. Sometimes, before Mr Wriford has finished ringing, Mr. Pennyquick, in gown and untasselled mortar-board, comes charging across the playground from the house, and there is then an alarmed stampede on the part of the boys to get in before him or to crowd in immediately upon his heels. Sometimes there is a very long wait before the appearance of the Headmaster; and Mr. Wriford, nervously irresolute as to whether to ring again or to begin school without him, stands wretched and self-conscious at his raised desk while the boys titter and whisper, or throw paper pellets, or look at him and — he knows — titter and whisper at his expense. This is his trial week, his temporary week. He is much overwrought in body and in mind. He does not know what authority he should

show or how to show it. He hesitates till too late to interfere with one outburst of horse-play or of giggling. At the next he hesitates in doubt as to whether, having overlooked the former, he can attempt to subdue this. While he hesitates, and while the noise increases, and while the humiliation and wretchedness it causes him increase — in the midst of all this Mr. Pennyquick charges in. Mr. Pennyquick is either unshaved and looking the worse for it; or he has shaved and has cut himself and dabs angrily at little tufts of cotton wool that decorate his chin.

“Anderson!” barks Mr. Pennyquick, seizing the roll-call book and a pencil but not looking at the one or using the other. “Adsum,” responds Anderson; and Mr. Pennyquick barks through the roll, which he knows by heart, much as if he were a sheep-dog with each boy a sheep and each name a bark or a bite in pursuit of it. He does not wait for responses. He barks along in a jumble of explosions, interspersed with a jumble of squeaked replies; punctuated at intervals, as if it were part of the roll, by a very much louder bark in the form of a fierce “SPEAK UP!” and concluded by a rush without pause into prayers — Mr. Pennyquick plumping suddenly upon his knees, much as if the sheep-dog had suddenly hurled itself upon the flock, and the first portion of the devotions being lost in the din of his pupils extricating themselves from their desks in order to follow his example, much as if the flock had responded by a panic stampede in every direction.

“Samuel Major,” barks Mr. Pennyquick, as if he were biting that young gentleman. “’Sum!” squeaks Samuel Major, as if he were bitten. “Minorsum-Smithsum - Stoopersum - Taylorsum — SPEAK UP! —

Tooveysum - Westsum - Whitesum — SPEAK UP! —
Williamssum - Wintersum - Woodsum - Ourfatherchartin-
heavenhallo'edbeth'name . . . Amen — SPEAK UP! —
mighty an mosmerciful fatherwethynunworthy servants . . .
Amen — SPEAK UP! ”

The schoolroom is divided by a red baize curtain into two parts. The scholars are divided into three forms of which Form One is the highest. Mr. Pennyquick, who knows the time-table of lessons by heart just as he knows the roll-call, follows the last Amen with a last “SPEAK UP!” and is himself followed in haste and trepidation by the members of Form One as he jumps from his knees and charges through the curtain barking “Form One. Thursday. Euclid. Blackboard. Come round the blackboard. Last night's prep?”

“Twelfth proposition, sir,” squeaks the boy whose eye he has caught.

This — or the same point in whatever else the subject may be — invariably marks the end of Mr. Pennyquick's early morning energy. He begins to draw on the blackboard or to find the place in a text-book. The energy goes, or the recollection of his medicine begins, and he changes his mind and barks: “Revise last night's prep!” There is a stampede to the desks and a burying in books. The Headmaster paces the room between the wall and the curtain, barking a “WORK UP!” at intervals and hesitating a little longer each time he turns at the curtain. “WORK UP!” and he comes charging through towards Mr. Wriford and the door. “Keep an eye on Form One, Wriford. Draw the curtain. I'm not quite the thing this morning. Take them on for me if I'm not back in ten minutes, will you? I

ought to be in bed, you know. I shan't be long. WORK UP!"

He is gone. He rarely appears again. If he appears it is when clearly he is not quite the thing and is only to skirmish a few times up and down the schoolroom to the tune of "WORK UP! WORK UP!" or to show himself on the playing-field, bellow "PLAY UP!" and betake himself again to the treatment of his complaint.

He is gone. Mr. Wriford is left with all the three forms in his charge. It is his trial week. He does not know what authority he should show or how to show it. He does not know what has been learnt or what is being learnt, and he is cunningly or cheekily frustrated at every attempt to discover it. In whatever way he attempts to set work afoot an excuse is found to stop him. By one boy he is told that "please, sir," they do not do this, and by another that "please, sir," they have never done the other. He has neither sufficient strength of himself nor sufficient certainty of his position to insist. Without advice, without support, he is left very much at the mercy of the three forms, and they show him none. While he tries to settle one form it is under the distractions and the interruptions of the other two. When he turns to one of these the first joins the third in idleness and disorder. At eleven o'clock he is informed "Please, sir, we have our break now," and there is a stampede for the door without awaiting his assent. Similarly at half-past twelve, when morning school ends, and similarly again at four and at half-past seven, which are the terminations of afternoon school and of evening preparation. There is no asking his permission. His position is exactly summarised by this — that the boys

know the rules and customs, he does not; and further by this — that while he remains miserably uncertain of the extent of his authority and of how he should assert it, they, by that very uncertainty, well estimate its limits and hourly, with each advantage gained, more narrowly confine it, more openly defy him.

IV

At one o'clock there is lunch. Sometimes Mr. Pennyquick is present as the boys assemble, and then they assemble in timid silence and eat with due regard to manners. Sometimes he does not appear till midway through the meal, till when there is greedy and noisy and slovenly behaviour, which frightened-looking Mrs. Pennyquick attempts occasionally to check with a timid: "Hush, boys," or upon which she looks with nervously indulgent smiles. There is painfully evident in all her dealings with the boys a dread amounting to a lively terror that anything shall be done to displease them. Mr. Wriford soon realises that her hourly fear is of a boy writing home anything that may lead to parental inquiry and thence to the disclosure of her son's affliction. In out-of-school hours she frequently visits the schoolroom and looks anxiously at any boy who may be engaged in writing. Mr. Wriford at first wonders why. He understands when one day, passing behind a boy thus occupied, she stops and says: "Writing home, Charlie? That's a good boy. Do tell your father that Mr. Pennyquick only this morning was telling me what a good boy you are at your lessons and how well you are getting on. Write a nice letter, dear. Would you like to come with me a minute and see if

I can find some sweeties in my cupboard? Come along, then."

With like purpose it is in fearful apprehension that she watches her son's face and his every movement when he is at the luncheon table. Mr. Wriford sees her look up with face in agony of misgiving when the Headmaster comes in late, sees her eyes ever upon him in constant dread as he sits opposite her at the head of the table. There does not appear great cause for nervousness. As a rule the Headmaster sits glowering and glum and fires off no more than, his own plate being empty, an occasional "EAT UP!" Sometimes he is boisterously cheerful. Whatever his mood he never omits one very satisfactory tribute to his own principles in which his mother joins very happily and impressively. It takes this form. Immediately Mr. Pennyquick sits down he calls in a very loud voice for the water to be passed to him. He then fills his glass from such a great height as to make all the boys laugh, then drinks, then sets down the tumbler with a sharp rap, and then says to Mr. Wriford: "I don't know if you're a beer-drinker, Wriford, but I'm afraid we can't indulge you here. I never touch anything but water myself. I attribute every misery, every failure in life, to drink, and I will allow it in no shape or form beneath my roof. I can give no man a better motto than my own motto: Stick to Water!"

Mr. Pennyquick then drinks again with great impressiveness, and Mrs. Pennyquick at once cries: "Boys, listen to that! Always remember what Mr. Pennyquick says and always say it was Mr. Pennyquick who told you. Stick to Water is Mr. Pennyquick's motto, and he never, never allows drink in any shape or form be-

neath his roof. Why, do you know — I must tell them this, dear — a doctor once ordered Mr. Pennyquick just a small glass of wine once a day, and Mr. Pennyquick said to him: ‘ Doctor, I know I’m very ill; but if wine is the only thing to save me, then, doctor, I must die, for wine I do not and will not touch.’ ”

All eyes in great admiration on this unflinching champion of hydropathy, who modestly concludes the scene with a loud: “ EAT UP! ”

V

Afternoon school, in its idleness, inattention, and indiscipline, is a repetition of the morning. Preparation from six to half-past seven again discovers irresolution, uncertainty and wretchedness set in the midst of those who by every device increase it and advantage themselves from it. At four o’clock it is Mr. Wriford’s duty to keep an eye on the boys while they disport themselves in the field where he had first seen them; at half-past five is tea; at shortly before eight Mr. Wriford is making his way to where supper awaits in the cheerful parlour behind the little shop of the cert. plumber.

Thither he goes through the darkness; and, as one in darkness that gropes for light, can see no light, and dreads the sudden leap of some assault, so trembles he among the dark oppressions of his mind.

These are evenings of early summer, and they have early summer’s dusky veils draped down from starry skies. Her pleasant scents they have, her gentle airs, her after-hush of all her daylight choirs. They but enfever Mr. Wriford. Her young nights, these, that not arrest her days but softly steal about her, finger on

lip attend her while she sleeps, then snatch their filmy coverlets while eastward she rubs her smiling eyes, springs from her slumber, breaks into music all her morning hymns, and up and all about in sudden radiance rides, rides in maiden loveliness. Ah, not for him!

These are young nights that greet him as he leaves the school. In much affliction he cries out upon their stillly peace. Look, here that new year in summer is, her peace, her happiness attained, that from the windows of the ward at Pendra he had watched blown here and there, mocked, trampled on, caught by the throat and thrust beneath the iron ground in variance with winter's jealousy. In her he had envisaged his own stress. Look, here she reigns in happy peace, in ordered quiet: he?

He moans a little as he walks. There is something in life that he has missed, and to its discovery he can bring no more than this—that it rests not in violent disregard of what happens to him or what he does, for that he has proved empty; nor rests in the ease that, by communication with London, might be his, for that inflicts return to the old self, hatred and fear of whom had driven him away. Where then? And then it is he moans. His mind presents him none but these alternatives; his mind, when miserably he rejects them, threateningly turns them upon him in forms of fear. "Well, you have got to live," his mind threatens him. "To-morrow you shall perhaps be turned out from this post at the school. You will have to face anew some means of life; you will have to suffer what has to be suffered in that part; face men and submit to their treatment of such as you, or face them and find fierceness sufficient to defy them."

"No, no!" he cries. "No, no!" He fears his powers of endurance, fears that beneath those trials he will be driven back to where is turned upon him the other threat. "Well, you must go back," his thoughts threaten him. "Money and comfort await you in London for your asking. You must go back to what you were. Live at ease in seclusion, if you will; ah, with your old way of life to tell you hourly that now it has you chained — that now you have tried escape, proved it impossible, and never again can escape it!"

He cries aloud: "No, no!" He moans for his abject hopelessness. He trembles for his fears at these his threats. Under his misery he wanders away from the direction of the little plumber's shop, hating to enter it and to its brightness expose his suffering; under his fears he hastens to it, clinging to this present occupation lest, losing it, one of the threats that threaten him unsheaths its sword upon him.

VI

When, by these vacillations, he is late for the supper hour, Essie will be at the shop door watching for him.

"Well, aren't you half late, though!" cries Essie. "I was jus' goin' to dish up. Oh, you lodgers, you know, you're fair cautions!"

"I was kept late," he says.

"Well, you weren't half walking slow when you come round the corner, though." She sees his face more clearly in the light of the shop and she says: "Oh, dear, you don't look half tired! My steak-and-kidney pudding, that's what you want! Here he is, Dad! Get

his slippers, Mother? That old Whiskyquick's been fair tiring him out!"

She runs to the kitchen and in a minute calls out: "All ready? Oh, it's cooked a fair treat!" She bears in the steaming steak-and-kidney pudding, sets it on the table, but stops while above the bubbling crust she poises her knife and watches it with her little twitches of her lips and with her sparkling eyes.

"Come, Essie," says Mrs. Bickers.

"Oh, isn't it funny, though," says Essie, "all bubbling and squeaking! Let's have a laugh!"

CHAPTER IV

MARTYRDOM OF MASTER CUPPER

I

It is by a very surprising and extraordinary event that, from the abyss of wretchedness, irresolution and humiliation of the trial week at Tower House School, Mr. Wriford finds himself lifted to the plane of its extension by week and week of ever increasing stability and assurance; finds himself suiting Mr. Pennyquick; finds himself in a new phase in which there develop new emotions.

This event is no less remarkable, no less apparently cataclysmal to his position in the school and to the school itself, than a tremendous box upon the ear which, early in his second week, Mr. Wriford administers to a First Form pupil whose name is Cupper and whose face is fat and dark and cunning.

Morning school, very shortly after the Headmaster with a loud "WORK UP!" has left his class "for ten minutes," is the hour of this amazement. A week's experience of the new assistant-master has opened to the pupils unbounded lengths of impertinence and indiscipline to which they can go; and the door has no sooner banged behind Mr. Pennyquick than they proceed to explore them.

A favourite form of this sport is to badger Mr. Wri-

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ford with requests, and it is done the more noisily and impertinently by strict observation of the rule established in all schools on the point. At once, that is to say, Mr. Pennyquick having left the room, there uprises a forest of arms, a universal snapping of fingers and thumbs, and a chorus that grows to a babel of: "Please, sir! Please, sir! Please, sir!"

One "Please, sir" is that there is no ink, another to borrow a knife to sharpen a pencil, another to find a book, another to open a window, another to shut it. Mr. Wriford tries to pick out a particular request and to answer it; he calls for silence and is responded to with louder "Please, sirs!" He thinks to stop the din by ignoring it, turns his back upon the noise and cleans the blackboard, and this is the signal for changing the note to a general wail of: "Oh, please, sir! — Oh, please, sir! — Oh, please, sir!"

Master Cupper carries the sport to a length hitherto unattempted. Master Cupper rises to his feet and with snapping finger and thumb calls very loudly: "Please, sir! Please, sir!"

"Sit down, Cupper!"

"But, please, sir; please, sir!"

"Sit down!" and Mr. Wriford turns again to the blackboard. He is quite aware, though he cannot see, what is happening. He knows that Cupper has left his place and is approaching him with uplifted hand and persistent "Please, sir!" He knows that Cupper is close behind him and, from the laughter, that doubtless he is misbehaving immediately behind his back. He turns and catches Cupper with fingers extended from his nose. He does not know whether to pretend he has not seen it, or how, if he should not overlook it, to deal

with it. His face works while he tries to decide. Cupper should have been warned. Cupper is not. Cupper's fat face grins impudently, and Cupper says: "Please, sir."

"Go and sit down," says Mr. Wriford, trying not to speak miserably, trying to speak sternly.

"But, *please*, sir!"

And thereupon, as hard as he can hit, stinging his own hand with the force of the blow, putting into it all he has suffered in this room during the week, Mr. Wriford hits Master Cupper so that there is a tolerable interval in which Master Cupper reels somewhere into the middle of next month before Master Cupper can so much as howl.

Then Master Cupper howls. Master Cupper, hand to face, opens his mouth to an enormous cavern and discharges therefrom four separate emotions in one immense, shattering, wordless blare of terror and of fury, of anguish and of surprise. Scarcely all the boys shouting together could have surpassed this roar of the stricken Cupper, and they sit aghast, and Mr. Wriford stands aghast, while tremendously it comes bellowing out of the Cupper throat. Then bawls Cupper: "I'll tell Mr. Pennyquick!" and out and away he charges, roaring through playground and into house as he goes as roars a rocket into the night. Fainter and more distant comes the roar, then, true to its rocket character, and to the consternation of those who listen, culminates in a muffled explosion of sound and in a moment comes roaring back again pursued by Mr. Pennyquick who also roars and drives it before him with blows from a cane.

Woe is Cupper! Cupper, for appreciation of this

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astounding sequel, must be followed as, hand to face, from assistant-master to Headmaster bellowing he goes. Blindly the stricken Cupper charges through the study door, slips on the mat, and blindly charges headlong into Mr. Pennyquick.

Then is the explosion that comes muffled to the listening schoolroom. First Cupper, shot head first into Mr. Pennyquick's waistcoat, knows that his head is lavishly anointed with strongly smelling medicine which Mr. Pennyquick is pouring into a tumbler from a very large medicine bottle labelled "Three Star (old);" next that his unwounded cheek and ear have suffered an earthquake compared with which that received by their fellows from Mr. Wriford was in the nature of a caress; next that with a bottle and a broken glass he is rolling on the floor; then, most horrible of all, that Mr. Pennyquick is springing round the room bellowing: "WHERE CANE? WHERE CANE? WHERE CANE?"

There is then a pandemonic struggle between Mr. Pennyquick, a cupboard, a cataract of heterogeneous articles which pour out of it upon him, and a bashful cane which refuses to emerge; and there is finally on the part of Master Cupper a ghastly realisation of his personal concern in this terrifying struggle and the part for which he is cast on its termination. Invigorated thereby, up springs Master Cupper, bawling, and plunges for the door, and simultaneously out comes the cane, and on comes Mr. Pennyquick, bawling, and plunges after him. Master Cupper takes three appalling cuts of the cane in the embarrassment of getting through the doorway, two at each turn of the passages, a shower in the death-trap offered by the open play-

ground, and comes galloping, a hand to each side of his face, into the shuddering schoolroom, bawling: "Save me! Save me!" and leading by the length of the cane Mr. Pennyquick, with flaming face and streaming gown, who cuts at him with bellows of: "FLOG you! FLOG you!"

The circuit of the schoolroom is thrice described with incredible activity on the part of Cupper, and with enormous havoc of boys, books, forms, and blackboards on the part of Mr. Pennyquick. The air is filled with dust, impregnated with Three Star (old). Finally, and with an exceeding bitter cry, Master Cupper hurls himself beneath a desk where Mr. Pennyquick first ineffectually slashes at him, then thrusts at him as with a bayonet, and then, to the great horror of all, turns his attention to the room in general. Up and down the rows of desks charges Mr. Pennyquick, hacking at crouching boys with immense dexterity, right and left, forehand and backhand, as a trooper among infantry; bellows "WORK UP! WORK UP!" with each slash, and with a final cut and thrust at a boy endeavouring to conceal himself behind a large wall map, and a final roar of "WORK UP!" disappears in a whirlwind of streaming gown and flashing cane.

II

The schoolroom clock has not altered five minutes between the first roar of unhappy Cupper, tingling beneath Mr. Wriford's hand, and the sobbing groans that now he emits crouching beneath his sheltering desk. Yet in that period the whole atmosphere of Tower House School is drastically and permanently changed.

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There stands in his place the assistant-master, momentarily expecting summary dismissal, yet, while to anticipate it he debates immediate departure, conscious that the whole room whose butt he has been now cowers beneath his eye and shudders at his slightest movement. There tremble on their benches the pupils who in this appalling manner have seen first the iron discipline of their assistant-master and next, most surprisingly and most horribly, his terrific support by Mr. Pennyquick. In the study there rocks upon his feet the Headmaster endeavouring to drown in Three Star (old) the memory of the exhibition he has given, and thinking of Mr. Wriford, in so far as he is capable of coherent thought, only in the aspect of one who must be implored to keep the school together while the outbreak of fury is explained and lived down by its perpetrator taking to his bed and his mother reporting a sudden breakdown.

Unhappy Cupper, it is to be remarked, martyred in his poor throbbing flesh for the production of this new atmosphere, is directly responsible for the several delusions on which it is in large measure based, in that he is firmly convinced that he told the Headmaster why he was come howling to his study and is assured therefore that it was the reason, not the manner, of his entry that earned him his subsequent flight for life paid for so horribly as he ran. The boys believe he made his appeal and, in the result of it, are tremblingly resolved to take any punishment from Mr. Wriford rather than follow Cupper's example of inviting Mr. Pennyquick's interference. Mr. Wriford believes his blow was reported and awaits dismissal for his loss of temper. And finally it is the belief of Mr. Pennyquick that Cupper

made a wilful and groundless entry to his study and that he was surprised thereby into a violence in which (said he to Three Star [old]): " God alone knows what I did."

It is while the first onset of these thoughts pursue their several victims that Master Cupper, under terror of his own portion in them, creeps snuffling from his hiding-place to his seat; and to his own seat also, on tiptoe, very timidly, the young gentleman who had taken shelter behind the wall map. Mr. Wriford makes a sudden movement with the intention of leaving the Tower House before he is dismissed from it. A convulsion passes through the pupils. They glue their heads above their books. Immediately they are in a paroxysm of study, each separate minute of which surpasses in intensity the combined labours of any week the Tower House has known since its Headmaster was forced to take to medicine.

Mr. Wriford remains in his seat to watch this extraordinary scene. The hour of the recreation interval comes and goes. Not a boy so much as lifts his head. The close of morning school shows itself upon the clock. Not a boy moves. This is the serenest period Mr. Wriford has known since ever the train from London brought him here a fortnight ago. It is a grim eye he sets upon the devoted heads of his toiling pupils. He hates them. For what they have made him endure in these days he hates them one and all, wholly and severally. He has a relish of their desperate industry beneath his observation. He has a relish that is an actual physical pleasure in this utter silence, in this feeling that here — for the first time since God alone knows when — he is where he rules and is not hunted. He leans back in his chair

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in sheer enjoyment of it. He closes his eyes and delights that he is utterly still.

The luncheon bell rings. Mr. Wriford goes to the door and opens it and stands by it. Very quietly, file by file from the rows of desks, with bent heads and with the gentle movements of well trained lambs, the boys pass out before him.

He follows them, and, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Pennyquick appearing, presides at a meal over which there broods, as it were, a solemn and religious hush.

CHAPTER V

ESSIE'S IDEA OF IT

I

It is Essie who helps Mr. Wriford carry forward the advantage that Master Cupper has gained him. Mr. Pennyquick did not show himself throughout the remainder of the day. The expected dismissal for having struck Master Cupper — awaited in the grim satisfaction of grovellingly docile pupils throughout afternoon school and evening preparation — is deferred, therefore, as Mr. Wriford supposes, until the morrow; and in the morning he finds himself mentioning it to Essie.

He is the reverse of talkative with the Bickers household. The oppression that nightly he brings home from Tower House sits heavily upon him in the bright little parlour, intensified, as on his first evening there, rather than relieved by it. He always dreads the ordeal of the Bible reading. He always escapes to bed immediately it is over. At breakfast he has excuse to hurry over his meal and hurry from the house. On this morning, however, Essie comes to breakfast dressed in hat and jacket. She is going to spend the day with friends in a neighbouring town. She has to start for her train as Mr. Wriford starts for his work and, as his way lies past the railway station, "Why, we'll jus' skeddaddle together," says Essie.

He cannot refuse. Facing the dismissal he anticipates, he more than ever desires to be alone; but Essie takes their companionship on the way for granted, and presently is chattering by his side of whom she is going to see, and what a long time it is since she has seen them, and appearing not at all to notice that he gives her no response. She is wonderfully gay and excited, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes even more radiant than commonly they sparkle. She has new gloves, which she shows him, turning the hand next him this way and that for their better display and announcing them "not half a bargain at one-an'-eleven-three, considering I never had this dress then to match 'em by;" and she has a linen coat and skirt of lilac shade and a hat of blue flowers in which she looks quite noticeably pretty; and she looks at herself in all the shop windows as she chatters and appears to be more delighted than ever at what she sees reflected there.

"Don't think I shall miss the train, do you?" says Essie. "Takes me a long time to say good-bye to Mother and Dad through not liking leavin' them alone all day. Don't think it's very unkind, do you, jus' once in a way, you know? You'd never think how I hate doin' it, though."

These are questions, in place of chattering information, and Mr. Wriford feels he must come out of his own thoughts to answer them. He chooses the first and tells her — his first words since they left the shop: "You've plenty of time. It takes exactly nine minutes to the station. I notice it by the big clock every day."

"Well, that's safe as the Bank of England then," declares Essie. "Plenty of time," and she takes advantage of it to stop deliberately for a moment and twitch

her veil in front of a tobacconist's shining window. Mr. Wriford pauses for her, and she turns dancing eyes to him when she has settled her veil to her liking. "Isn't it funny, though, seeing yourself with pipes and all in your face? Let's have a laugh!"

He does not join her in the merry laugh she enjoys; and suddenly he is aware that she is regarding him curiously, and then that she is making the first personal remark she has ever addressed to him. "You aren't half one of the solemn ones," says Essie.

It is then that he tells her: "Well, I'm on my way to be dismissed. There's not much joke in that."

Essie gives a little exclamation and stops abruptly, her face all concern. "Oh, you don't say!"

"Yes, I do. Come on."

"The proper sack?"

"Come along. You'll miss your train."

"Oh, bother the old train!" cries Essie. "That's fair done it. I shan't be half miserable thinking of you."

"Why should you?" says Mr. Wriford indifferently.

She replies: "Well, did you ever! Me going off to enjoy myself and thinking of you getting the sack! Oh, that old Whiskyquick, he's a caution!"

"But there's no earthly need for you to mind."

"Why, of course there is," says Essie. "Especially with me going off on a beano like this. Of course there is. My goodness, I know what it is for a lodger when he gets the sack! Whyever didn't you tell us before — all of us? Then we might have talked it over, and ten to one Dad could have advised you. I've seen Dad get a lodger out of a mess before now. Just tell me. What-ever is it for?"

"I hit one of the boys."

Essie's eyes wince as though herself she felt the blow. "Not hard?"

"As hard as ever I could."

"Oh, dear!" says Essie reproachfully. "You never ought to do that, you know. Just a slap—that's nothing. I've fetched one of my Sunday-school boys a slap before now. But losing your temper, you know!"

"He wanted it," said Mr. Wriford.

"That's what you think," says Essie. "Well, never mind about that now. Just tell me."

He tells her. He finds himself less indifferent to her sympathy as he proceeds. He finds it rather a relief to be telling her of it—rather pleasantly novel to be telling anybody anything. He tells her from the moment of his blow at Cupper, and why the blow was struck, to the furious onset of Mr. Pennyquick, slashing among the boys with his cane—the humourous aspect of which he for the first time perceives and laughs at—and he finds himself, as he concludes, rather leaning towards the sympathy he expects.

But the sympathy is not for him; nor does Essie, who usually can see a joke in nothing at all, laugh at Mr. Pennyquick's wild gallop among his pupils.

"Oh, those poor boys!" says Essie. "Don't I just feel sorry for them!"

"You wouldn't if you knew them."

"Wouldn't I, though! I wish I had half your chance!"

He asks her impatiently, irritated at the unexpected attitude she has taken: "My chance at what?"

"Why, your chance to make them happy. Why, they're not boys at all. I think it every time I see them."

"No, they're little fiends."

"That's silly talk," says Essie rather sharply. "I daresay you'd be a fiend, for that matter, with that old toad of a Whiskyquick not to care what happens to you except to frighten you to death."

Mr. Wriford says coldly: "I didn't know we were talking about the boys. You asked me to tell you —"

"Oh," cries Essie, "don't you get a crosspatch now! I know it was about your sack we were talking, and I am sorry, truly and reely sorry. But, look here, I don't believe you'll get it, you know. I believe old Whiskyquick's that ashamed of himself he won't show his face for a week. An' I don't believe he even knows you hit that poor what's-his-name — Cupper? — so there! I believe he hit him for disturbing him, and I daresay catching him drinking, before the poor little fellow could speak. I do reely. Look here —"

They have reached the station and Essie stops outside the booking-office. "Look here, I tell you what there is to it. Don't you worry about the sack. Ten to one you won't get it till he's got some one instead of you, anyway. Just you don't worry. It only makes it worse, like when you're going to have a tooth out. You see if you can't make those poor boys happy. Why, you know, when I first had my Sunday-school class, oh, they were cautions! They'd never had any one to be kind to them, jus' like your boys. I told 'em stories, and told 'em games, and took 'em a walk every time, and showed 'em things, and you'd never believe how good they are now. You just try. I mean to say, whatever's the good of anybody if you don't try to make other folk happy, is there? Oh, there's my train signalled. Goo'-by. I shan't half think how you're

getting on. I say, though — ” and Essie, who has been extraordinarily grave in this long speech, begins to sparkle in her eyes again.

“ Yes,” says Mr. Wriford.

“ You haven’t got a minute to buy my ticket? ”

“ I’ll get your ticket, of course.”

“ That’s fine.” She counts him some money from her purse. “ Third return Wilton, excursion. Mind you say excursion. One and tuppence. Here comes the puffer.”

Mr. Wriford says “ excursion; ” and then Essie, by hanging back as the train comes in, indicates clearly enough that she would like him also to find her a carriage. When she is in and leaning from the window she explains the reason of these manoeuvres.

“ Thanks awfully,” says Essie and whispers: “ You know, I like people to see me with a young man to fuss me about.”

Mr. Wriford’s smile is the first expression of real amusement he has known in many long months. As the train begins to move he raises his hat. “ Oh, thanks awfully,” cries Essie, immensely pleased. “ Remember what I said. I shan’t half think how you’re getting on. Mind you remember! Goo’-bye! Goo’-bye!”

II

He remembers. Mr. Pennyquick’s manner at roll-call and prayers distinctly bears out all three of Essie’s conjectures, and that helps him to remember. The Headmaster charges through the names and through the devotions even more rapidly than usual. At their termination he does not even indulge the pretence of

taking Form One in a lesson. "Amen — WORK UP!" concludes Mr. Pennyquick and turns at once to Mr. Wriford. "Can you possibly take them all this morning, Wriford? Just for once. I absolutely ought to be in bed. I'm on the very verge of a breakdown. You saw what happened to me yesterday. I really don't know what I'm doing. The doctor insists on a little wine, but I'm fighting against it. Perhaps I'm wrong. But you know my principles. If you could just look after them till lunch." He strides to the door, opens it, closes it again, strides back and glares upon his pupils, strained over their books. "WORK UP!" and then more threateningly, more hoarsely than ever: "WORK UP! WORK UP!" and then to the door and a last "WORK UP!" and then discharges himself from view as abruptly as if Three Star (old) had stretched a hand across the playground and grabbed him out.

Thus are proved, as Mr. Wriford reflects, seated in the shivering silence that remains after the Headmaster's disappearance, two of Essie's beliefs. Mr. Pennyquick is obviously ashamed of himself — apprehensive of the results upon his boys and upon his assistant-master of his yesterday's exhibition and seeking by greater fierceness to coerce the one and by pitiable excuses to cajole the other; obviously also he projects no summary measures against Mr. Wriford — likely enough, indeed, is ignorant of cause of offence. There remains Essie's third premise: that the boys are wretched and to be pitied; and with it her advice that it is for Mr. Wriford to make them happy. He remembers. He looks on them, cowed before him, with the new eyes of these instructions, and for the first time since he has assumed his position here sees them, not as little fiends who have

made his life a burden, but as luckless unfortunates whose lives have themselves been burdensome under one tyrant, and who now believe themselves delivered over to another.

He remembers. He remembers Essie's Sunday-school boys who were "little cautions" until she told 'em stories and showed 'em games and took 'em for walks and showed 'em things; and suddenly Mr. Wriford sits upright and says briskly: "Look here!"

There is a sharp catching at breaths all about the room, a nervous jump — a panic apprehension, clearly enough, that this is the prelude to repetition of yesterday's violence. It makes Mr. Wriford feel very sorry. He remembers Essie's "Poor little fellows. I don't feel half sorry for them." He contrasts their dejected and aimless and slipshod and now frightened ways with his own bright school-days. He gets up and steps down from the platform on which his desk is raised and stands amongst them, his hands in his pockets, feeling curiously confident and easy. "Look here," says Mr. Wriford, "let's chuck work this morning and have a talk. We ought to be jolly good pals, you know, instead of messing about like we've been doing ever since I came. When I was at school we used to be frightful pals with our masters. Of course we couldn't stick 'em in Form sometimes, but out of school they were just like one of us. They played footer and all that with us, and the great thing was to barge them like blazes, especially if one had had a sock over the ear like poor old Cupper there."

First surprise; then a nervous giggle here and there; then more general giggling; now all turning towards

Master Cupper (very red and sheepish), and very cheerful giggling everywhere.

Rather jolly, thinks Mr. Wriford, and proceeds: "How is old Cupper, this morning, by the way? Cupper, you and I ought to shake hands, you know," and Mr. Wriford strolls down to Master Cupper, and they shake, Master Cupper grinning enormously. "That's all right. You and I are pals, anyway. You and I versus the rest in future, Cupper, if they get up to any of their larks. You were a silly young ass, you know, yesterday, cocking a snook at me behind my back. That's absolutely what you'd expect a Board School kid to do. What's your father, Cupper?"

"Please, sir, he's an auctioneer," says Cupper.

"Auctioneer, is he? Well, you look out he doesn't sell you one of these days, my boy, if you go cocking snooks all over the place."

Immensely delighted laughter at this brilliant flash of wit, and Mr. Wriford sits easily on Cupper's desk with his feet on the form before him and goes on. "You know, you're all rather young asses, you are, really. You don't work in school, and you don't play out of it. Why, hang it, you don't even play cricket. You're keen on cricket, aren't you?"

Enthusiastic exclamations of "Rather!"

"Well, you go fiddling about with rounders — a girl's game; and you don't even play that as if you meant it. Why on earth don't you play cricket?"

"Please, sir," says some one, "we haven't got any proper bats and wickets."

"Man alive," says Mr. Wriford, "you've got some stumps and a ball, and I've seen an old bat kicking

about. What more do you want? Tell you what, we'll start right away and get up Cricket Sixes — single wicket, six a side. They're a frightful rag. We can get three — four teams of six boys each. Each team plays all the rest twice to see which is the champion. We'll keep all the scores in an exercise book and call it the Tower House Cricket League. I'll be scorer and umpire. Come on, we'll pick the Sixes right away."

Up to his desk Mr. Wriford goes amidst a buzzing of delight and gets a clean exercise book and then says: "Half a moment, though. We ought to have a Captain of the School, you know, and some Prefects — Monitors. The Captain will be my right-hand man, and the Prefects will be his. We'll vote for him. That's the best way. Each of you chaps write down the man you think ought to be the Captain, and then old Cupper will collect the papers and bring them to me, and we'll count them together."

It is done amid much excitement, and presently Mr. Wriford hails Abbot as Captain of the School, and up comes Abbot, loudly applauded, a red-headed young gentleman of pleasant countenance, to shake hands with Mr. Wriford and with him to select the Prefects. Three Prefects, Mr. Wriford thinks, and says: "I vote we have old Cupper for one."

"And Toovey," says Abbot.

"Right, Toovey. And what about Samuel Major? He looks a bit of a beeper. Well now," continues Mr. Wriford, thoroughly interested, "you four chaps had better each be captain of one of the Cricket Sixes. We'll pick them next. They must all be as equal as possible."

This takes quite a long time, but is satisfactorily settled at last and the names written down in the exercise-book and the first two matches arranged for that afternoon: Abbot's *versus* Toovey's, and Samuel Major's *v.* Cupper's. Then "Good Lord," says Mr. Wriford, looking at the clock, "it's nearly lunch time. I vote we chuck it now and go and look out these stumps and things and find a decent pitch. Half a minute, though. You, Abbot, you know, and you three Prefect chaps must remember what you are and must help me to keep order and to see that no one plays the fool in school or out, and all that kind of thing; and you other chaps must jolly well obey them. This afternoon, for instance, we'll have a talk about work and see just where we all stand and make up our minds to work like blazes. Well, while I'm fixing up Form Three, you must see that Form One doesn't play the goat, Abbot, and you, Samuel, must look after Form Two. See the idea of the thing? Work is jolly interesting, you know, if you go at it properly, like I'll show you. Some subjects — like geography for instance — we'll take all together, and that'll be quite a rag. We're simply going to pull up our socks and work like blazes and play like blazes, too. See? Come on, let's get those cricket things fixed up."

Out they go. Mr. Wriford holding Abbot's arm, and other boys clinging about him — out to the field where first from the roadside he had seen them dejected and listless, and where now they run before him, keen, excited, eager, taken right out of their old sorry habits.

He, also, the first time in many months, out of himself removed.

III

Mr. Wriford goes back to the plumber's shop that night occupied with plans for developing on the morrow the interests of the Cricket Sixes, the Captaincy, the Prefects, and the new schedule of lessons drawn up during the afternoon. Essie is home before him, chattering more volubly and more brightly than ever by reason of her doings with her friends and her day-long desertion of Mother and Dad. She runs to the shop door when she hears Mr. Wriford and greets him eagerly.

"You never got the sack, did you?"

"No, he never said a word. I believe you were right about him being rather ashamed."

Essie does a little dance of joy and claps her hands. "Oh, if I'm not lucky, though!" cries Essie. "That was the one thing would have spoilt the fair jolly old time I've had, and there it's turned out *As* just like all the rest!"

Mr. Wriford tells her: "It's very nice of you to be glad about it."

"Why, of course I'm glad," cries Essie. "That's just finished up my day a treat! Now you won't half enjoy the things I've brought home for supper from my young lady friends. I was afraid — oh, you don't know what it is to have a lodger about the house when he's lost his job! They're fair cautions, lodgers are, when they've got the sack!"

And later in the evening, when he sees Essie sitting and looking before her with her eyes smiling and her lips twitching, she suddenly looks up, and catching

his gaze, reveals that it is of him she is thinking. " You weren't half in the dumps, though, were you?" she says. " Isn't it funny, though, when a thing's turned out Ar, to look back and see what a state you were in? Isn't it, though? Let's have a laugh!"

CHAPTER VI

THE VACANT CORNER

I

THE morrow finds eager pupils awaiting Mr. Wriford, and eager work and eager play, and again in the evening he is returning to the plumber's shop occupied with the plans for the next day thrown up by these new developments.

So it is also on the following day, and so the next, and so by day and day and week and week. Interestedly and swiftly the time in these preoccupations passes. He is quite surprised to find one evening that weeks to the number of half the term have gone. Captain of the School Abbot brings it to his notice; and on arrival at Tower House next morning Mr. Wriford brings it, together with Abbot's reason for mentioning it, to the notice of Mr. Pennyquick.

Mr. Wriford knocks on the study door, waits for the "One moment! One moment!" which is called to him and which gives a chinking of glass in suggestion of the fact that the Headmaster is putting away the medicine bottles, exhibition of which, as an Open-air Man, is so distasteful to him, and then enters to find the Open-air Man lying, as usual, on the sofa, amidst an air that appears to have escaped from beneath a cork rather than have come from the window.

Mr. Wriford expresses the hope that he is better, Mr. Pennyquick the fear that he is not, and there is then brought forward the suggestion advanced by Abbot.

"Thursday is half-term," says Mr. Wriford. "Do you think the boys might have a holiday? They've been working very well."

"A whole holiday?" says Mr. Pennyquick doubtfully.

Mr. Wriford knows perfectly well the reason for the dubiety in the Headmaster's voice. In these days he has taken the work of the school entirely out of Mr. Pennyquick's hands. Mr. Pennyquick no longer so much as reads roll-call and prayers. Abbot calls the roll and is mighty proud of the duty; Mr. Wriford takes prayers. Mr. Pennyquick perhaps twice in a week will tear himself from his sofa and his medicines and suddenly burst upon the schoolroom, patrol a few turns with loud and quite unnecessary "WORK UP'S!" and as suddenly discharge himself again to his study.

The less frequently he appears, the more he shirks any scholastic duties with the neglect they entail of nursing his distressing ailments in the seclusion of his study. Thus it is the idea of having the boys on his hands for a complete day that gives this doubt to his tone when a whole holiday is projected, and Mr. Wriford, well aware of it, quickly reassures him on the point.

"Well, I think they deserve a whole holiday," says Mr. Wriford. "Of course I'd come up just the same and look after —"

"My dear fellow, a whole holiday by all means," Mr. Pennyquick breaks in. "By all means. Splendid! They deserve it. You're doing wonderfully with them, my dear fellow. My mother reports she has never

known them so happy or so well-behaved. No ragging in the dormitories at night. Cold baths every morning at their own request. Good God, do you know I'm so much a cold bath man myself that I take one twice a day — twice a day winter and summer — when I'm fit. Clean and smart and quiet at meals. Perfect silence in the schoolroom. Keen, manly play in the field. Devoted to you. My dear fellow, you're wonderful. Whole holiday? Whole holiday by all means. I was going to suggest it myself."

"Thursday, then," says Mr. Wriford. "They'll be delighted. I thought of playing cricket in the morning and then, if you agree, asking Mrs. Pennyquick if she could fix us up some lunch and tea things in hampers, and we'd go and picnic all the rest of the day at Pennington woods and bathe in the river and that kind of thing."

The Headmaster thinks it splendid. "Splendid, my dear fellow. Splendid. Certainly. I'll see to it myself. Cricket! Bathing! Good God, you'll think it very weak of me, but I feel devilish near crying when I think of a jolly day like that and me tied up here and unable to share it. Cricket! Good God, why, when I was at Oxford I made nine consecutive centuries for my college one year. It's a fact. Nine absolutely — or was it ten? I must look it up. I believe it was ten. Bathing! My dear fellow, a few years ago I thought nothing of a couple of miles swim before breakfast — side-stroke, breast-stroke, back-stroke; good God, I was an eel in the water, a living eel. I'm an outdoor man, absolutely. Always have been. That's the cruelty of it. Hulloo, there's the bell. I shall take prayers this morning, Wriford. I'm coming in all day for a real good

day's work with the dear fellows. I don't know what the doctor will say, but I'm going to do it."

Mr. Wriford is at the door, and the Outdoor Man already stretching down an arm to feel beneath the sofa. "Perhaps not prayers," says the Outdoor Man. "You'd better not wait for me for prayers. I've just my loathsome medicine to take. Take prayers for me for once, like a good fellow, and I'll be with you in two minutes. Splendid. You're wonderful. Two minutes. Damn."

There is the sound of a bottle upset beneath the sofa, and Mr. Wriford hurries off to find Abbot already halfway through the roll, then to take prayers, and then, amidst tremendous applause, to announce a whole holiday for Thursday's half-term.

"Well, come on, let's make certain we deserve it," says Mr. Wriford, when the manifestations of joy have been sufficiently expressed. "Come along, Form Two, arithmetic. Let's see if we can't understand these frightful decimals. Clean the blackboard, Toovey. Abbot, you take Form Three behind the curtain and give them their dictation. Here's the book. Find an interesting bit and read it out loud first. Form One, you're algebra. You'd better take the next six examples. Cupper, you're in charge. Now then, Two, crowd around. Where's the chalk?"

II

This was the spirit of the lessons nowadays. Everybody worked. Nobody shirked. Interest, even excitement, was found under Mr. Wriford's guidance to lie in the hated lesson-books, and it was excitedly wrestled

out of them. Some of the subjects, as Mr. Wriford taught them, were made exciting in themselves; the rest were somehow inspired with the feeling that the next chapter — the next chapter really is exciting once we can get to it. All the Tower House schoolbooks were horribly thumbed and inked and dog-eared in their first few pages — long indifferently laboured over, never understood, cordially loathed. Beyond lay virgin pages, clean, untouched, many sticking together as when fresh from the binder's press. "Look here," Mr. Wriford used to say, "these French grammars, they're all the same — all in a filthy state up to page thirty and rippingly clean beyond, just like a new story-book. Look here, let's pretend all that new part is a country we're going to emigrate into and explore, and that first of all we've got to toil over the Rocky Mountains of all this first muck. You half know it, you know. If we get through a good few pages every time we'll get there like lightning. Come on!"

They always "came on" responsive to this kind of call. The work in all the subjects belonged to the distant period of Mr. Wriford's own school-days. He had to get it up as it came. He brought to the boys the quite novel effect of a master learning with them as they learnt, and that produced the stimulus of following him in place of the grind of being driven. "My word, this is a teaser!" Mr. Wriford would say, frankly stumped by an arithmetical problem; and the delighted laugh that always greeted this was the impetus to an eager and intelligent following him when he would get it aright and demonstrate its processes. Wits were sharpened, perceptions stirred. Boyish high spirits, mental alertness, and vigorous young qualities were

rescued from the dejection and apathy and slovenliness and ugliness that had threatened to submerge them: and Mr. Wriford finds himself infected and carried along by the moral quickening he has himself aroused.

III

He knows it. He feels it. He both knows and feels it because, whereas formerly he groped ever in darkness of spirit and beneath intolerable oppression of mind, now, when engaged in these occupations or when thinking upon them, he is lifted out of himself, and in the zest of their activities forgets the burden of his own tribulations. Thus what had been all darkness, all shrinking, all fears, becomes divided, as street lamps break the night, into periods of light while he is within the arc of these pursuits and into passages of the old gloom only between one day's leaving of the school and the next morning's return to it. Slowly from this he advances to stronger influence of the light, less frequent onset of the shadows. First by these lamps the measureless blackness of his way is broken. Gradually he is handed more quickly and more surely from lamp to lamp. Not often now, with their immense and crushing weight, their suffocating sense of numbing fear, those old and intolerable clouds of misery descend upon him; not often now those black abysses that yawned on every side about his feet; not often those entombing walls that towered every way about his soul. Sometimes they come. He, in the days of that nightmare hunted life in London, sometimes had known snatched intervals of relief—in companionship, in reading—in the midst of which there would strike

down upon him the thought that this was but transitory, that presently it would end, that presently he would be returned to the strain, to the fears, to the darkness, to the panic bursting to get out of it. So now, sometimes, when his mind moved ever so little from its occupation with these new interests, he would be clutched as though immediately outside them clutching hands waited to drag him out and drag him down — clutched and engulfed and bound again in bonds of terror, as one whose pleasant slumber suddenly gives place to dreadful sense of falling. In the midst of his thoughts upon some aspect of work or play with his pupils, "This cannot go on always," he would think; "This will somehow come to an end sooner or later;" and immediately the waiting hands would up and snatch him down; immediately the fears oppress him; immediately the walls, the blackness come; and he would cry: "What then? Where then?" and grope again; and bruise once more himself on his despair; and plan to go away and abandon it all, so that at least he might of his own will leave these interests, not wait till suddenly they to their own end should come and he be driven from them.

So sometimes these old tumults came upon him; yet came less frequently, and the less frequently they came were with less suffering escaped. Now, in their onsets, was for the first time a way of refuge from them. Where formerly he had been utterly abandoned to them, sinking more and more deeply within them at every cry of his despair, now was a knowledge that they could be lost; and quicker and more strongly a conscious grasp at what should lose them and draw him out from their oppression. At first with dreadful effort and often

with defeat, gradually with less affliction and with more certain hold, he would attempt to turn his mind from these broodings and fasten it upon his enterprises in the school. There was to be thought out a way of helping Form Two to get the hang of parsing in their English grammar to-morrow; there was the idea of starting the young beggars in a daily class of drill and physical exercises; there was the plan of rummaging among Pennyquick's books to pick out a little library of light reading for the boys and to read to them himself for half an hour each day; there was the thought of how jolly nicely they had responded to his proposal to go through their play-boxes and pick out all the cheap trash he found they had been reading, and of the jokes they had had over the bonfire made from the collection; there was the thinking of other ways in which this complete confidence they gave him could be used for their own benefit; there was — there were a hundred of such preoccupations for his mind, any one of which, could he but fix tenaciously enough upon it, would draw him from the quicksands of his depression and set his feet where strongly they bore him.

IV

Thus came he gradually into a state in which the old depths of oppression troubled him no more; in which the apprehensive, hunted look went from his eyes; in which sometimes a smile was to be seen upon his face; and in which — to the observer — his outstanding attribute was just that he was very quiet, very reserved: gently responsive to advances from others but never of himself offering conversation. So may one

newly convalescent after great illness be observed; and to this Mr. Wriford's case in these days may best be likened. As the convalescent, after long pains, deliriums, fevers, nights void of sleep, is carried to sit in the sunshine from the bed where these have been endured, so in this haven rested Mr. Wriford from his mind's distresses. There sits the patient, wan and weak, desirous only to enjoy the pleasant air, wanting no more than just to feed upon the smiling prospect his eyes that all the devils of his fevered brain have burned; silently acquiescent to ministrations of those who tend him. Here lived Mr. Wriford, quiet and reserved, no longer preyed upon by those fierce storms of hopeless misery such as, on the first night at the Bickers' table, had sent him torn and broken from the room; wearing a gentle aspect now in place of those contracted eyes, that knotted brow, born of the fever in his brain; hands no longer trembling; voice eased of its strained and rasping note that came of fear it should break out of his control and go in tears of his distress. There rests the convalescent's body, thin and enfeebled from its rackings on the bed. Here stayed Mr. Wriford, wanting only here to stay where refuge was from all the devils that had devoured him. There rests the patient, slowly replanning life that death had challenged, sickness shattered. Here lived he, quietly revolving what had brought him here and what should follow now.

Was there something in life that he had missed? Calmly now he could ask and search the question. Till now, since its first coming, it had been as a gnawing tumour, as an empoisoned wound within him — an inward fire, a pulsing abscess to relieve whose tortures he, as a wild beast thus maddened that turns its jaws

upon its vitals, had bruised himself to madness in frantic goadings of his mind. Now he could review it calmly, almost dispassionately. The thing was out of him, no longer burning in his brain. Till now, he had thought upon it in frenzy of despair, now he could stand as it were away from it — turn it this way and that in examination with his hands, smile and shake his head in puzzlement, and put it aside to go to his duties with his boys, return and take it up and puzzle it again. Was there something in life that he had missed? Yes, there was something. He could unriddle it as far as that. He was at peace now, but there was nothing in that peace. Some attribute was missing. This was peace: but it was emptiness. This was quietness: but a thousand leagues remote from happiness. Happiness was an active thing, a stirring thing, a living thing, a warm thing, a pulsing thing. Barren here, cold here. Let the mind run, let the mind run about a thousand pleasures such as money could buy. They might be his for the asking. He had but to return to London, and they were his. Well, let the mind run. Back it would come disconsolate, empty-handed, with no treasures in its pack. Nothing attracted him. Ah, but somewhere, somewhere, somewhere, that thing was — the live thing, the stirring thing, the active thing, the warm thing. Something that he had missed in life: that was certain. Happiness its name: that was assured. Where? In what? How to be found? Only negative answers to these. Well, shake the head over it and put it away; smile and confess its bafflement. Here are things to be done. Do them and return to puzzle again in a little while.

So and in this wise quietly through the days — stand-

ing aside in this retreat and looking at life as one that, furnishing a room, stands to stare at a bare corner, and only knows something is wanted there, and only knows that nothing of all he has will suit, and only turns away but to return again and stare.

CHAPTER VII

ESSIE

I

THAT simile of Mr. Wriford's condition in these days to one who, rearranging the furniture of his room, stares in constant bafflement at a bare corner and can by no means determine with what to fill it, may be advanced a further step. The decorator's eye, narrowly judging all the objects that are at his disposal, will in time, in a "better than nothing" spirit, turn more frequently to one, and presently he will try it: there came a time when it occurred to Mr. Wriford, dispassionately revolving the vacancy in his life, that there was one might fill it — Essie.

One day, and this was the beginning of the idea — not then conceived — Mr. Wriford asked Essie if he might take her for a walk. A Saturday evening was the day: a July evening, cool and still — very grateful and inviting after oppressive heat through morning and afternoon; a breeze come up with nightfall. There was no preparation class at Tower House on Saturdays. Mr. Wriford left his boys reading the books he had rummaged for them out of Mr. Pennyquick's library and came home to early supper. By eight o'clock Essie had washed up, and Mr. Wriford came to her where she was standing by the shop door enjoying the pleasant air.

"Isn't it jolly, though?" said Essie, moving to give him place beside her in the entrance.

"Yes, it's beautifully cool now," Mr. Wriford agreed.

Several young couples — man and maid — were passing in one direction up the street. Mr. Wriford watched Essie's face as she watched them. He could see her eyes shining and those little twitches of her lips as she observed each separate swain and maid. With the slow passing of one pair, their hands clasped, walking very close together, she gave a little squirm and a little sound of merriment and turned to him.

"Aren't they funny, though," said Essie, "court-ing!"

Mr. Wriford asked her: "Where are they all going?"

"Why, they're going to the Gardens, of course. There isn't half a jolly band plays there Saturday evenings."

She was the prettiest little thing, as Mr. Wriford looked at her, standing there beside him. He liked her merry ways, so different from his own habitual quietude. It occurred to him that, apart from that walk to the station together some weeks before, he hardly ever had spoken to her out of her parents' company. Why not? — so pretty and jolly as she was.

A sudden impulse came to him. He hesitated to speak it. She might resent the suggestion. He looked at her again — those funny little twitchings of her lips! "May I take you for a stroll, Essie?" he said.

There was not the least reason to have hesitated. Essie's face showed her pleasure. She quite jumped from her leaning pose against the doorway. "Oh, that's fine!" cried Essie. "I'll just pop on my chapeau. I won't be half a tick."

She was gone with the words, and he heard her running briskly up the stairs to her room and then very briskly down again and then in the parlour, crying: "Dad, me an' the lodger are going for a stroll in the Gardens. Sure you've got everything you want, Mother? Look, there's the new silk when you've finished that ball. Isn't it pretty, though!" and then the sound of a kiss for Mother and a kiss for Dad; and then coming to him, gaily swinging her gloves in a brown little hand, her eyes quite extraordinarily sparkling.

"There you are!" cried Essie, and they started. "That wasn't long, was it? Why, some girls, you know, keep their young fellows waiting a treat."

"Do they?" said Mr. Wriford, a trifle coldly.

"Don't they just!" cried Essie, noticing nothing that his tone might have been intended to convey, and beginning, as they went on in silence, to walk every now and then with a gay little skip as though by that means to exercise her delighted spirits.

Mr. Wriford, now that he was embarked upon his sudden impulse, found himself somehow dissatisfied with it. He would have been embarrassed, perhaps a little disappointed, he told himself, had she refused his invitation. He found himself embarrassed, perhaps a little piqued, that she had accepted it so readily, taken it so much as a matter of course. And then there was that "young fellow" expression with its obvious implication. His idea had been that she would have shown herself conscious of being — well, flattered, by his invitation. Not, he assured himself, that there was anything flattering in it; but still —. Perhaps, though, she was more conscious of it than she had seemed to

show; and coming to that thought he asked her suddenly, giving her the opportunity to say so: "I hope you didn't mind my proposing to take you for a walk?"

Essie skipped. "Good gracious!" cried Essie. "Whyever?"

"I thought you might think it rather — sudden."

Essie laughed and skipped again. "Sudden! Why, you've bin long enough, goodness knows! Why, I've bin expecting you to ask me for weeks, you know!"

"Have you?" said Mr. Wriford.

"Think I have!" cried Essie. "Why, the lodger always does!"

"Oh!" said Mr. Wriford.

This time Essie seemed to detect something amiss in his tone. In a few paces she was bending forward as she walked and trying to read his face. "I say," said Essie, "you aren't in a crosspatch, are you?"

"Of course I'm not. Why should I be?"

"Sure I don't know. You wanted me to come, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. I shouldn't have asked you otherwise."

"Well, I don't know," said Essie. "Young fellows are that funny sometimes!"

Silence between them after that, but as they came to the Gardens Essie showed that the funny ways of young fellows had been occupying her in the interval. "Of course, you're always very quiet, aren't you?" she said.

"I don't talk much," Mr. Wriford agreed.

"Of course you don't!" cried Essie and seemed so reassured by the recollection that Mr. Wriford suddenly

felt he had been behaving a little unkindly — stupidly; and with some idea of making amends smiled at her.

Essie flashed back with eyes and lips. "Of course you don't!" she cried again. "Well, I vote we enjoy ourselves now if ever. Just look at all the lights! See the funny little blue ones? Aren't they funny though, all twinkling! Let's have a laugh!"

With a laugh, therefore, into the Gardens; and with a laugh Mr. Wriford's unreasoning distemper put off. Jolly little Essie!

No need, moreover, to do more than listen to her, and to think how jolly she was, and how pretty she looked, as she turned chattering to him while she led the way among the groups clustered about the bandstand. "We'll go right through," said Essie. "There's seats up there where you can sit an' hear the band an' see the lights a treat. Jus' watch a minute to see that great big fat man with the trombone where he keeps coming in pom! pom! There! See him? Oh, isn't he a caution!"

Close to Mr. Wriford she stands, and Mr. Wriford watches her watch the fat gentleman with the trombone, her lips twitching while she waits for his turn and then her little squirm of glee when he raises his instrument to his mouth and solemnly administers his deliberate pom! pom! to the melody. "Oh, dear!" cries Essie, "isn't this just too jolly for anything! Come along. Up this path. I know a not half quiet little seat up here. I say, though! When you've been looking at the lights! If this isn't dark! Oo-oo!"

This "Oo-oo!" is expressive of the fact that really it is rather ticklish work suddenly being launched on a pitch dark path, falling away steeply at the sides, after

the glare of the bandstand; and with the "Oo-oo!" comes Essie's arm pressing very close against Mr. Wriford's and her hand against his hand.

"Let's hold hands," says Essie, and her fingers come wriggling into his — cool and firm, her fingers, and there is the faint chink of the bracelets that she wears. "I like holding hands, don't you?"

Cool and firm her fingers. His hand is unresponsive, but rather jolly to feel them come wriggling into it and then twine about it. She settles them to her liking, and this is enlocked about his own, her palm to his. Yes, rather jolly to feel them thus: they give him a curious thrill, a desire.

II

Essie's seat was found to be quite the not half quiet little place that she had promised. It stood at the termination of the winding path, backed by a high rockery of ferns and looking down upon the lights and the bandstand whence came the music very pleasantly through the distance.

Here were influences that touched anew the curious thrill her fingers had given Mr. Wriford. The warm, still night, the feeling of remoteness here, the music floating up, Essie very close beside him, her face clear to his eyes in this soft glow of summer darkness. A very long time since to Mr. Wriford there had been such playfulness of spirit as stirred within him now. Soft she was where she touched him, sensibly warm against his arm, enticingly fragrant.

"Told you this would be jolly, didn't I?" said Essie.

"Yes, it is," agreed Mr. Wriford, and put his arm along the seat behind her shoulders.

Essie didn't seem to mind.

And then his hand upon the shoulder further from him.

Nor to mind that.

"All right, I call it," said Essie. "You know, if you came out more to the band and places like this, you soon wouldn't be so quiet."

"I shouldn't care much about it by myself," said Mr. Wriford.

"Oh, I'd come with you," Essie assured him. "Nothing's much fun not when you do it by yourself. I say, whatever are you doing with that arm of yours on my shoulder?"

"I'm not doing anything with it," said Mr. Wriford, and gave a little laugh, and said: "I'm going to, though."

"What?"

"This."

"Oo-oo!" cried Essie.

Mr. Wriford's "This" was bending his face to hers, and his arm slipped a little lower down her shoulders, and drawing her towards him. "Oo-oo-oo!" cried Essie and pressed away and turned away her head. "Oo-oo!" and then he kissed her cheek, then brought his other arm around and turned her face to his. "Oo-oo-oo! I say, you know!" — and there, close beneath his own, were those soft, expressive lips of hers, and twice he kissed them: and of a sudden she was relaxed in his arms, no longer struggling, and there were depths in those eyes of hers, and this time a long kiss.

"There!" said Mr. Wriford and released her; and

immediately two curious emotions followed in his mind. First, that, now the thing was over, it was over — completed, done, not attracting any more.

“I say, you know!” said Essie, settling her hat and pouting at him: and all rosy she was, all radiant, enticingly pouting, pretending aggrievement — just the very blushes, pouts, and smiles to have it done again. But for Mr. Wriford not enticing at all: over, done; conceiving in him almost a distaste of it; and, moved a trifle away from her, he said hardly: “I suppose the lodger always does that, too?”

“Well, most of ’em,” said Essie cheerfully; and at that his new emotion quickened, and he made a petulant, angry movement with his shoulders.

She detected his meaning just as she had detected the coldness in his voice as they came down towards the Gardens together a short while before. She detected his meaning, and answered him sharply, and the words of her defence and the manner of it broke out in him the second of the two emotions that followed his caprice.

“Well, what’s the odds to it if they have?” said Essie, sitting up very straight and speaking very tensely. “Where’s the harm? It’s only fun. Not as if I had a proper young fellow of my own. Take jolly good care if I had! Where’s the harm? I like being kissed. I like to think some one’s fond of me.”

Now, for all the sharpness of her tone, she looked appealing: a trifle of a flutter in those expressive lips of hers: a hint of a catch in her voice. Swiftly to Mr. Wriford came his second emotion. Poor little Essie that liked to think some one was fond of her! Jolly little Essie with her “Let’s have a laugh!” Here was

the kindest, cheeriest little creature in the world! Let him enjoy it!

"That's all right, Essie," said Mr. Wriford and moved to her again and took her brown little hand.

"Glad you think so, I'm sure!" said Essie. "That's my hand, if you've no objection," and she withdrew it.

Mr. Wriford took it again and held it while it wriggled. "Come, who's the crosspatch now?"

"Well, that's nice!" cried Essie. "I'm sure I'm not."

"Put your fingers like you had them when we walked up. That's the way of it. This little one there and that little one there."

"Oh, go on!" said Essie, but settled her fingers as she was told.

"Rather nice just now, don't you think?" said Mr. Wriford.

"Not bad," said Essie.

"Perhaps we'll do it again?"

"Perhaps the moon'll drop plump out of the sky."

"Well, we'll watch it," said Mr. Wriford, "and if it doesn't we will. Let's be friends, Essie."

"Oh, we're friends, all right."

"Well, I'll pretend I'm your — young fellow. How about that?"

Essie gave a little laugh. "Likely!" she said. "You know, I believe you're a caution after all, for all you're so quiet. My young fellow! Why, I don't even know your name — your Christian name, I mean."

"What do you think?"

"However do I know? Shouldn't be a bit surprised if it was Solomon."

"Well, it isn't. What would you like it to be?"

Essie looked across the bandstand lights beneath them for a moment, then made a little snuggling movement with the hand in Mr. Wriford's, and then looked at him and said softly: "Well, I've never had an Arthur."

"Call me Arthur, then — so long as you don't make it Art or Artie."

"What, don't you like Art, then?" said Essie, and then suddenly, her eyes asparkle again, her lips twitching, "Aren't names funny, though? Let's have a laugh!"

And Mr. Wriford laughed and said the name Edith always made him think of seed cake; and Essie laughed immensely and said Alice always reminded her of a piece of silk; and Mr. Wriford said Ethel was a bit of brown velvet; and Essie said Robert was a bouncing foot-ball; and in this laughter and this childish folly Mr. Wriford found himself immoderately tickled and amused, and Essie quite forgot the disturbance that had followed the kissing; and home when the band stopped they went in quick exchange of lightsome subjects.

Mr. Wriford, for the first time that he might have remembered, went to bed and fell asleep without lying long awake to think and think.

The significant thing was that he did not try to remember it, nor reflect upon it. He was smiling at an absurdity of jolly little Essie's as he put out his light: he was soon asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

OUR ESSIE

I

WALKS with Essie are frequent now; and in the house talk with Essie at all odd moments that bring them together. Jolly little Essie! Mr. Wriford finds himself often thinking of her as that, and for that quality always seeking her when moodiness oppresses him. Days pass and there is a step in advance of this: good little Essie! Careless, he realises himself, of what mood he takes to her. He can be silent with her, depressed, oppressed, thinking, puzzling: Essie never minds. He can be irritable with her and speak sharply to her: Essie never minds. Essie is content just to rattle along and not be answered, or, if that seems to vex him further, then just to occupy herself with those bright, roving eyes of hers, and with those merry thoughts which they pick up and reflect again in the movements of those expressive lips. Days pass and his thoughts of her take yet a further step: pretty little Essie! — Essie who likes to be kissed, who sees “no odds to it,” who likes to think somebody is fond of her! She is jolly little Essie — always cheers him: “Oh, Arthur!” when for an hour he has not spoken a word, or speaking, has snubbed her, “Oh, Arthur! Just look at those dogs chasing! Oh, did you ever! Aren’t they funny,

though! Let's have a laugh!" She is good little Essie — never minds: "Well, whatever's the odds to that?" when sometimes he apologises for having been ungracious. "I daresay I'm not half a nuisance, chattering, when you want to be quiet. Why, you're always quiet though, aren't you? I don't mind." She is pretty little Essie: "Oo-oo!" cries Essie. "I say, though!" and then, as on that first occasion, relaxes and gives him those pretty, expressive lips of hers, and is warm and soft and clinging in his arms; and then one day, when in his kiss she detects some ardour, born, while he kisses her, of a sudden gathering realisation of his frequent, his advancing thoughts of her, says to him softly, snuggling to him: "What, are you fond of me, Arthur?"

More swiftly than the space of the inspiration of a single breath an idea springs, fixes, spreads within him. It is determination of all his thought of her in their advancing stages: it is swiftest look from that vacant corner in the room of his life to Essie, always so jolly, always so good, ah, so pretty, yielding in his arms. Swift as a single breath it is. Why should not Essie fill that vacant place?

"What, are you fond of me, Arthur?"

Deep in his sudden thought he does not answer her. What sees she responsive to her question in his eyes? She sees that which makes her leave his grasp.

In her eyes he sees sudden moisture shining.

Deep in the sudden thought that has him — bemused as one that, in earnest conversation with a friend, turns bemusedly to address a remark to another, he says: "Hulloa, you're not crying, Essie?"

"Likely!" says Essie, blinking.

"You are, though. What's up?"

"That's the sun in my eyes."

"There's precious little sun."

Essie dabs her eyes with her handkerchief and gives a little sniff. "Well, there's precious little tears."

"Essie, you asked me if I was fond of you."

She turns upon him with sudden sharpness. "More fool me then."

"What do you mean? Essie, I am. I'm very, very fond of you."

"Come on," says Essie briskly. "We'll be late. I was only having a game — so are you."

II

Here is a new idea for Mr. Wriford — come to him suddenly, but, as now he sees, in process of coming these many days. Here is a new idea, completely developed in that swift moment while Essie asked him: "What, are you fond of me, Arthur?" but over whose development now constantly he ponders — welding it, shaping it, assuring himself of it in its every detail. It is solution — no less — of what has hounded him these many years. It is discovery of what shall fill that vacant place over which, in the quietude of these more recent days, dispassionately he has puzzled. Essie the solution: Essie the thing that shall fill up the vacancy. He wonders he has not thought of it before. Who, out of the turmoil, the hopelessness, the abject misery in which he came here, who found him the quietude? Essie. Who for the old grinding torments, the abysmal fears, has exchanged him the dispassionate wondering? Essie. Look, look upon the present state that now is his, contrast it with the old, and seek who

is responsible. Essie. His early constraint in the Bickers' household is vanished as completely as his early miseries at the Tower House School. He is confident and at ease and actively interested when among his boys. Who showed him the way of it? Essie. In the life behind the plumber's shop he is become very intimately the "one of us like" that Mrs. Bickers, at their first meeting, had told him they liked their lodgers to be. By whose agency? Essie's. Essie has told Mother and Dad his name is Arthur and to call him Arthur: and Arthur he is become, alike to the cert. plumber, who delights to instruct him in the mysteries of plumbing and often from his workshop in the yard hails him "Arthur! Arthur, come an' look at this here! I'm fixin' a new weight to a ball-tap;" and to Mrs. Bickers who as often as not adds a "dear" to it and says: "Arthur, dear, give over talking to Essie a minute an' jus' see if you can't put that shop bell to rights like Mr. Bickers showed you how. It's out of order again." Who to this pleasant homeliness introduced him? Essie. Who supports him in its enjoyment? Essie. Who is the centre, the mainspring of this happy household? Essie. Essie, Essie, Essie, jolly and good and pretty little Essie! He meets her at every thought. She, she, supplies his moods at every turn!

Very well, then. The school term at Tower House is drawing to a close. Scarcely a fortnight remains before the holidays begin. What then?

Ah, then the new thought that suddenly has come to him. In the quietude of mind, in the dispassionate puzzlement upon what it is that he has missed in life — in this convalescent attitude towards life that now is his he has no desire to return, when the school term is

ended and he is unemployed, to the wandering, to the hopeless quest that brought him here. Why not advance by Essie the quietude that by Essie he has found? Why not by Essie fill the dispassionate puzzlement that by Essie has become dispassionate where for so long it had so cruelly been frenzied? What if he went away with Essie? What if he took her away? What if he so far resumed touch with the prosperity that waited him in London as to get money from his agent, due to him for his successful novels, and go away with Essie — live somewhere in retreat with Essie, have Essie for his own? Why not? No reason why. It was fixed and determined in his mind in that very instant when, as she asked him "What, are you fond of me, Arthur?" it came to him.

The more he thinks upon it the more completely it attracts him. . . .

He thinks upon it, and it attracts him, with no delusion of what, if he acts upon it, it will give him. It will not give him positive happiness. He would take Essie away with no such delusion as that. But strongly, seductively, it offers him a negative peace. With Essie no need longer to brood on what it was in life that he had missed: Essie who never minded, who always brightened him, who then would be his own — Essie would stifle that old hopeless yearning. There would be pleasure in money with Essie — pleasure in pleasing her, in watching her delight in little things that it could buy. He first would travel on the Continent with Essie, delighting in her delight at worlds of which she had scarcely so much as heard. How she would laugh at funny foreigners and at funny foreign ways! Then he would settle down, take a house somewhere, live

quietly, take up his novel-writing again, have Essie always to turn to when he wanted her, to minister to him and entertain him, and have her — being Essie — at his command to keep out of his way when he wished to work, or perhaps to think — ah, for thoughts sometimes still would come! — and not be worried. Yes — jolly little Essie, good little Essie — there was refuge, refuge to be found with her! Yes — pretty little Essie — she was desirable, desirable, desirable to him! Yes, let it be done! Yes, let him immediately set about the accomplishment of it!

III

His purpose was no sooner definitely fixed, than in the way of its fulfilment practical difficulties began to arise. They arose in form of scruples. He intended no harm to Essie. She never should suffer in smallest degree, by word or act, in giving herself to him. But to marry her never — at the first making of his purpose — so much as crossed his mind. A little later this aspect of his moral intentions towards her came up in his thoughts — and marriage he at once dismissed as altogether subversive of that very peace of mind he anticipated in having her for his own. To marry her, as he saw it, were an irrevocable and dreadful step that immediately would return him to new torments, new despair. Bound for life to such as Essie was, not loving her, only very fond of her, very grateful to her — why, the bond would terrify him and goad him as much as ever he was terrified and goaded by the bonds and responsibilities of the London days from which in frenzy he had fled. Misery for him and, knowing himself.

he knew that he would visit it in misery upon her. Panic at what he had done would fill him, consume him in all the dreadful forms in which he knew his panics, directly he had done it. He would hate her. Despite himself, despite his fondness for her, despite all she had given him and could give him, despite all these, if he were bound to her he would be unkind to her, cruel to her. Merely and without bond to have her for his own presented his Essie — his jolly little Essie, good little Essie, pretty little Essie — on a footing immeasurably different. That very fact of being responsible for her without being bound to her would alone — and without his happiness in her — assure her of his constant care, his unfailing protection always and always. Natured as he was — or as he had become in the days of his stress — he thought of bondage as utterly intolerable to him. No; marriage was worse than unthinkable, marriage was to lose — and worse than lose — the very happiness upon which now he was determined.

Yet scruples came.

He had not the smallest doubt of winning Essie to his intentions — Essie who liked to think somebody was fond of her, who liked to be kissed, who had confessed of the lodgers that "most of 'em had" — who, in fact, was Essie Bickers. He knew, thinking upon it, what had been in pretty little Essie's heart when she said softly: "What, are you fond of me, Arthur?" He knew it was that she loved him. He knew what had been in her heart when, having said it, she drew away from him, and he knew why as she drew away he had seen tears in her eyes. He knew it was because, having made her confession of love, she had seen no response of love in his eyes that only were bemused with sudden

thought upon his sudden plan. He knew he had only to tell her that shé was wrong, that indeed he loved her. Yet scruples came.

IV

He set about his plans. On the morning when but a week remained to the end of the term — the date he had fixed in his mind — he wrote before he came down to breakfast a letter to his agent in London.

“DEAR LESSINGHAM,

“I’m still alive! I’ve been wandering — getting back my health. I was rather run down. Now, very soon, I hope to get to work again. Keep it to yourself that you’ve heard of me again. I’ll be seeing you soon. Meanwhile, you’ve got a pile of money for me, haven’t you? I want you, please, to send me at once £200 in £10 notes to this address. I’m going abroad for a bit.

“Yours ever,

“PHILIP WRIFORD.”

Funny to be in touch with that world again! He put the letter in his pocket. He would post it on his way to school. Imagine Essie’s eyes when she saw all that wealth! He could hear her cry — he imagined himself showing it to her in a first-class carriage bound for London — “Oh, Arthur! Did you ever, though!”

Smiling upon that thought, he went down-stairs to the parlour; and it was thus, at the very moment as it were of first putting out his hand to take Essie, that scruples came.

He found Mrs. Bickers seated alone. There were sounds of Essie gaily humming as she prepared break-

fast in the kitchen. Mrs. Bickers, busily sewing, looked up and smiled at him. "Good morning, Arthur. I declare I do like to see you come down of a morning smiling like that. Busy, aren't I? So early, too!" and she held up what looked to be a blouse that she was making, and told him: "That's for our Essie!"

The smile went from his face and from his thoughts. "Our Essie!" Only now that phrase, and what it meant, entered his calculations on his purpose; and with it the thought of his smiles which Mrs. Bickers had been so glad to see — and what they meant.

He desired to turn the conversation; yet even as he made answer he knew his words were leading him deeper into it. "Why, you're not surprised to see me smiling, are you, Mrs. Bickers?" he said. "This is what I call a very smiling house, you know."

Mrs. Bickers set down her work on her lap and smiled anew. "Well, that's good news," she said. "Ah, and it's not always been either, Arthur."

"Hasn't it, Mrs. Bickers?"

"Oh, dear, it hasn't! Why, Mr. Bickers and me we had a heap of trouble one time."

"But you're very happy now?"

"I've been happy," said Mrs. Bickers, smiling again, "eighteen years and three — four — eighteen years and four months."

"That means ever since something?"

"Ever since our Essie came," said Mrs. Bickers softly.

Our Essie! Ah! He said dully: "Yes, you must be fond of Essie?"

"Fond!" Mrs. Bickers echoed him. "Why, Arthur, she's all the world to Mr. Bickers an' me, our Essie. She's such a bright one! Our Essie came to us very

late in life, and you know I reckon we've never had a minute's trouble since. Looking back on what we'd had before, that's why we say, Mr. Bickers an' me, that we reckon she was a gift sent straight out of heaven. We're sure of it. Brought up with old folk like us, she'd grow up quiet and odd like some children are, wouldn't you think? Or likely enough discontented, finding it dull? But you've only got to look at our Essie to feel happy. There's not many can say that of a daughter, not for every bit of eighteen years, Arthur. We reckon we're uncommon blessed, Mr. Bickers an' me."

In comes Essie with a steaming dish: "Oh, these sausages, Mother! Jus' look at them *sizzling!* Oh, aren't they funny, though!"

He does not post his letter on the way to school. He does not post it on the way back from school. He carries it up-stairs again in his pocket when he goes to bed. Scruples!

Scruples — he lies awake and reasons the scruples; he tosses restlessly and damns the scruples. Scruples! In the morning he has settled them. He rises very early before the house is astir. He comes down to post his letter and goes at once through the back yard which offers nearer way to the letter-box.

"Hulloa, Arthur! Why, you're up early!"

This time it is Mr. Bickers, hailing him through the open door of his workshop where he is busily occupied with blow-flame and soldering-irons.

"Well, not so early as you, Mr. Bickers. I thought I was first for once."

The cert. plumber laughs, evidently well-pleased.

"Come along in an' give a hand. Soldering, this is. Me! I'm never abed after five o'clock summer-times."

"I often think you're wonderfully young for your years, Mr. Bickers."

Another laugh of satisfaction. "I'm younger than I was a score years back; and that's a fact, Arthur."

"What's the secret of it?"

"Why," says Mr. Bickers, "there is a secret to it, sure enough. It's this way, Arthur. Now you put the solder-pot on the lamp again. There's matches. This way — I was fifty-two years growing old, and I've been close on nineteen years growing young. Ever since — Hullo! careful with it!"

"Ever since — ?" says Mr. Wriford, his head averted, fumbling with the lamp, fumbling with his thoughts.

"Ever since our Essie came to us."

"Yes," says Mr. Wriford, and adds "Yes, that's much what Mrs. Bickers was telling me only yesterday."

"Why, it's the same with both of us," says Mr. Bickers; and then changes his voice to the voice that Mr. Wriford recognises for that in which he reads the scriptural portions at night. "You mark this from me, Arthur." Mr. Bickers continues. "You're a young man. You mark what I tell you —"

Necessary to face Mr. Bickers while he tells — to face that serene old countenance, those steady eyes, that earnest voice. "Prayers aren't always answered the way you expect, Arthur. You'll find that. There's man's way of reckoning how a thing ought to be done, and there's God's way. We'd had uncommon trouble,

Mrs. Bickers an' me, a score years back, and we prayed our ways for to ease it. Essie came. God's way. Our Essie come to us a blessing straight out of heaven."

Necessary to face him, necessary to hear in his voice, to see in his eyes, to watch in the radiation that fills up the careworn lines about his mouth and on his brow — necessary to hear and to see there what "Our Essie" means to him.

Necessary to say something. . . . To say what? Mr. Wriford can only find the words he said yesterday to Mrs. Bickers. He says: "Yes, you must be fond of Essie."

"Fond!" says Mr. Bickers. "I'll tell you this to it, Arthur. I'll tell you just what our Essie is to us. There's a verse we say night and morning, Mrs. Bickers an' me, when we're returning thanks for our blessing: 'Through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us.' That's our Essie."

The dayspring from on high! Irreverent, in Mr. Wriford's dim recollection of the text, in its application to Essie. He tries to laugh at it. How laugh at it? Dayspring — ah, that is she! She is that in her perpetual vitality, in her bubbling, ceaseless, bottomless well of spirits. She is that to him, and therefore he requires her, requires her. Ah, she is that to them! Scruples — scruples — infernal scruples — ridiculous scruples. He means no harm to her. God knows he means nothing but happiness to her. Yet the day passes. He defers his intention to post his letter till after breakfast. He goes to school and defers it till the luncheon hour. He goes then for a walk and defers

it till he is coming home. He comes home and brings his letter with him.

Scruples — damn them! Scruples — damn himself for entertaining them!

CHAPTER IX

NOT TO DECEIVE HER

I

LET Essie decide! That is the decision to which he comes, with which he stills his scruples. He desires her. The more he reflects upon possession of her — his to amuse him, to run his house that he will take for her, to make him laugh, not to interfere with him, requiring nothing from him but what he shall choose to give her — the more he visions this prospect, the more ardently it attracts him. There he sees that vacant place in his life filled up; there he sees sufficiently attained the secret of happiness that he has missed; there, belonging to him, he sees her — jolly little Essie — filling, hiding, forgetting him his endless quest, his hopeless hopelessness, his old-time miserable misery. He cannot marry her. He does not love her. He could not be mated — for life! — to such as she in all her funny little phrases reveals herself to be. He only wants her. Then come the scruples. Well, let Essie decide! She shall know his every intention, his every feeling. He will not even so far delude her as to tell her he loves her. If she who loves him is willing to go with him, what need matter Mr. and Mrs. Bickers with their devotion to our Essie? What are they to him? Why should they interfere with his life? What are they to Essie if he — as he will

be — is everything to her? And then, with "Let Essie decide," he finally crushes under foot all of scruples, all of conscience, that remain after this review of his resolve: finally, for this is his last and comforting and confident resolve — that if Essie is shocked and frightened and will not, he will immediately accept it: whatever the temptation will nothing deceive or trick her, not by so much as a look pretend he loves her, immediately leave her and immediately return to the old hopelessness, the old quest, the old emptiness of all his former years.

Decided! His scruples stilled! Himself assured, absolved! Let Essie decide it. Now to act.

II

This is Thursday. He has carried that letter nearly a week unposted in his pocket. To-morrow the Tower House School breaks up. On Saturday Mrs. Bickers and Essie are going for a three weeks' summer holiday to Whitecliffe Sands, which is an hour away on the Norfolk coast, and it has been decided a month before that he is to accompany them for their first week as Mrs. Bickers' guest. The kindly invitation had been made, and he had gratefully accepted it, in the period before this sudden thought of filling with Essie that vacant corner in the room of his life: in the period when he had been content dispassionately to drift along until the holidays should terminate his engagement — dispassionately to leave till then conjecture upon what he next should do.

This summer visit to Whitecliffe Sands was, as he then learned, an annual excursion. Mr. Bickers stays

with the shop, but closes it and comes down to mother and Essie every Saturday until Monday. When only that month remained before the holiday came, discussion of the subject became Essie's chief topic of conversation at supper every evening; all aglitter it made her with reminiscences of Whitecliffe's past delights and with anticipations of its fond excitements now to be renewed: the pier that has been opened since last summer, the concert party that will reopen its season there just before they arrive, the progress she has made and means to make in swimming, the white shoes she is going to buy, the new coat and skirt that she and mother are making because "My goodness, you don't have to look half smart on the parade, evenings!"

In the midst of this had come one evening Mrs. Bickers' "What about Arthur?" and then, to his rather rueful smile and announcement that he had no plans as yet beyond the end of the term, her kindly proposal, evidently arranged beforehand with Mr. Bickers: "Well, I tell you what would be very nice, Arthur dear, that is, if you haven't got another job of work immediately by then. Me and Mr. Bickers have had a talk about it. We'd like you to come with Essie an' me jus' till Mr. Bickers comes down after our first week. There's his nice room you could have in our lodgings, and you'd be just our guest like. A nice blow by the sea would do you a world of good, an' nice for our Essie to have a companion."

Essie had clapped her hands in immense delight: he had accepted with marks in his eyes and voice of a return of that sense of being overwhelmed by this household's kindness that in the early days here often overwhelmed him. Now he set his teeth against consider-

ation of that aspect. Let Essie decide! He might take her away to-morrow or on Saturday morning: it might be easier to wait and slip off one day from Whitecliffe. Let Essie decide!

That evening he asked her.

III

The night was fine for a stroll after supper. They passed together up the main street of the town towards the Gardens — Essie desperately excited with the immediate nearness of Whitecliffe and attracted by all the shops in case there was something she had not yet bought for the holiday: himself revolving in his mind how best to open his proposal. He wished to do it at once. He found it very difficult to begin.

"Oh, those parasols!" cried Essie, stopping before a brightly-illuminated window. "Do stop, Arthur. That sort of blue one with lace! Did you ever! Wouldn't I like that for Whitecliffe though! Can you see the ticket? Nine-an'-eleven-three! Oh, talk about dear!"

"That's not really expensive, Essie."

"My goodness, it is for me, though. Ten shillings, Arthur!"

"Essie, would you like to be rich?"

"Oo, wouldn't I just!"

"What would you say if I was rich, Essie?"

Essie turned away from the coveted sunshade and laughed delightedly at him. "Goodness, wouldn't it be funny! I'd say what ho! What *ho!*"

"Essie, I want to tell you something. I am rich. I'm what you'd call very rich."

"Picked up a shilling, have you?" cried Essie, gleefully entering into the game. "Let's go into the bank and invest it!"

"No, we'll go in here," said Mr. Wriford, the contents of a bookseller's window they had reached giving him a sudden idea. "We'll go in here. I'll show you something."

She caught his arm as he stepped towards the door. "Whatever do you mean?"

He answered her very intensely, "Essie, be serious. I've a lot to tell you to-night. First of all, I'm rich. I've only been pretending all the time I've been down here. My name's not Arthur at all. It's Philip —"

Essie made a laughing grimace. "Ur! Philip's like skim milk."

Unheeding her, he went on. "Philip Wriford. I'm an author —"

"Oh, if you aren't a caution!" cried Essie.

"You don't believe it?"

Essie assumed a very ingenuous air. "Your mistake, pardon me. I wasn't born jus' before supper, you know."

"Will you believe it if I go in here and ask to see some of my books?"

"Oh, wouldn't I like to see you dare!"

"Come along," and he stepped inside the porch of the shop and opened the door.

Essie, half-laughing, half-frightened at this boldness, clutched at his arm. He caught her hand and led her within. "Oh, if you aren't a caution to-night!" Essie whispered. "Don't, Arthur! Arthur, don't be so bold!"

"You've got to believe."

A counter at the end of the shop displayed above it the words "Lending Library." Essie, most terribly

red in the face, followed him while he stalked to it, and then stood confounded with his boldness and striving immensely to restrain her laughter while Mr. Wriford addressed the young woman who came towards them.

"Have you got any of Philip Wriford's books in the library?" Mr. Wriford asked her.

"We've got several copies," he was told. "But they're all out. There's a great demand for them."

His eye caught the top volume of a pile of books on the counter, from each of which a ticket was displayed, and he motioned towards it.

"Yes, that's his last," the young woman said, "but it's ordered. It's going out to-morrow."

"I can look at it?"

"Oh, you can look at it. If you like to take out a subscription by the week or longer, you can put your name down for it. There's other copies out," and she moved away.

Mr. Wriford took up the book with something of a thrill — the first actively stirring thought of his work since he had fled from it. It was the book he had delivered to his agent shortly before that night of his escape, and had seen ecstatically reviewed in the paper at Pendra. He had never seen it in print. He opened it at the title page. "Twelfth Edition," he read aloud to Essie. "You know what that means. It was only published in the autumn."

"How do you know?" said Essie.

"I tell you I wrote it. I tell you I'm Philip Wriford."

The young woman's departure permitted Essie to relieve her laughter. "Oh, Arthur, do not!" she cried.

"I tell you it's true." He turned to the opening chapter and began with very strange sensations to read

what he had written in days separated from the present by illimitable gulfs of new identity. The cunning of his own hand, thus separated from the identity that now read the words, was abundantly apparent to him. There was a nervous and arresting force in the first paragraph, a play of wit above a searching philosophy, that called up and strongly attracted his literary appreciation, dormant beneath the stresses of his past months.

Occupied, for the moment he forgot Essie standing by his side. Her voice recalled her to him. She was reading over his shoulder, and reaching the end of the paragraph, spoke her opinion.

"Isn't it silly, though!" said Essie.

He closed the book and put it down and turned to her and looked at her. "Do you think so?" he said.

"Well, don't you?" cried Essie. "I never read such ridiculous nonsense. I'm sure if you were an author, Arthur, you couldn't write such silly stuff as that."

He laughed a trifle vexedly. "Come along," he said, and laughed again, this time to himself and with better humour, as they came into the street and turned towards the Gardens. He could appreciate the blow at his conceit: further, this little scene was illuminating demonstration of the gulf social and intellectual between himself and Essie, and somehow that approved him in his intentions towards her: what vexed him now was only the failure of this sudden plan to inform Essie of his position in life and so to give him opening for the proposal he intended.

The bookseller's was the last shop in the High Street. They had entered the Gardens before Essie, consumed with laughter, could find words for comment. Then

she said: "Oh, Arthur, if you weren't a fair caution! I'd never have thought it of you!"

"You don't believe it?"

"Why, of course I don't!"

"Well, you've got to believe somehow that I've got a lot of money."

"Daresay I can believe the moon is made of green cheese if I try hard enough. I say, though, serious, whatever for have I got to believe you're rich?"

It was the desired opening. He slipped his hand beneath her arm. "Because I want to spend it on you, Essie. I want to make you happy with me."

He felt and heard her sharply catch her breath. He looked down at her and saw her eyes dim and her face suffuse in sudden rush of colour.

"Oh, Arthur!" Essie said and caught her breath again.

"Let's go up to our seat, Essie."

IV

In silence up to their seat, and on their seat a little space in silence. She first to speak. She, while he sat determining how best to tell her, turned to him eyes starry as the stars that lit them, in which still and deeper yet he saw the moisture that had dimmed them a moment before, and still, and cloudier yet, her face all cloudy red.

She said very softly: "What, have you proposed to me, Arthur, dear?"

He was prepared for anything but that. He was reassuring himself, while they waited in that silence, upon his resolution not to deceive her, not even to pre-

tend he loved her as she understood love, upon his determination, for his honour and for hers (so he convinced himself), straitly, without deception, without temptation, to throw all the burden of decision upon her love for him. This "What, have you proposed to me?" took him unawares. It caught him so unexpectedly that, of its very unexpectedness, it threw out of him its own response where, had he first imagined such a question, to fashion answers to it had filled him with confusion, nay, with dismay.

Its own response! It came to him as a question so ludicrously odd, so blundering, so inept, ah, so characteristic of jolly little Essie's funny little ways, that he gave a little laugh, and put his arm about her shoulders, and playfully squeezed her to him and laughed again and exclaimed "Essie!"

The softness left her voice, the dimness her eyes. "Oh, aren't I glad!" cried Essie and snuggled against him and said: "Oh, hasn't it come all of a sudden, though!"

Her funny little ways! Close she was against him — jolly to hold her thus: his arm about her, her face close beneath his own, his other hand that held her hand caressing her soft warm cheek — his dear, his jolly little Essie. But not to deceive her! Let him hold to that. Let her be told in her own opportunity that which he has to tell. Let him lead her towards it.

He asked her — avoiding her question, not confirming her exclamation — "Do you love me, Essie?"

She wriggled herself closer up to him, and laughed at him with those soft expressive lips and with those eyes of hers, and said "Oh, love you!" as though love were too ridiculously poor a word.

"Put up with me, Essie — always? You know what I am sometimes."

"Put up with you!" cried Essie, and again the wriggle and again the laugh, and then said "What a way to talk!" and by a movement of her face towards his own made as if to kiss such talk away.

He kept himself from that. Not to deceive her! "Suppose I made you miserable, Essie?"

"However could you?"

"Suppose I did? You know how I get sometimes."

"Mean when you're quiet?" said Essie, snuggling. "Of course you're quiet sometimes, aren't you? My goodness, I don't mind. I'd just have a jolly laugh by myself."

Her funny little ways! He was fighting against them. They urged him that they were in themselves just what attracted him — always to have them to turn to in his moodiness. Ah, not to deceive her! He said heavily: "I don't mean that, Essie. Suppose — suppose I made you more miserable than that? Suppose I told you something that made you think I couldn't be fond of you?"

She asked him quickly: "What, been engaged before, have you?"

"I've been lots of things. I'm going to tell you."

He felt her stiffen. "I only want to hear this one. Why didn't you marry her?"

"I think because she wouldn't marry me."

"Oh, dear!" cried Essie, and wriggled. "Isn't this awful! Oh, don't I hate her, though! Whyever wouldn't she?"

Here was a way to tell her. What if it meant to lose her? Here was the opportunity. Let him hold to his

vow! He said deeply: "Essie, because she knew me too well. She knew some of what you've got to know, Essie. She'd tell you."

"Like her to try!" said Essie and sat up with a jerk.

He could face her now. There she was, his jolly little Essie, looking so fierce, breathing so quickly. Tell her and lose her? Clasp her and kiss away that angry little frown? Not to deceive her! Hold, hold to that! He began: "She'd tell you — what I've got to tell you. She'd tell you — listen to me, Essie. What would you do if she told you I'd make you — or anybody — unhappy? That I'm all — all wrong, all moods, all utterly impossible? Essie, that I can't love anybody really — not even you? That I'm not to be trusted? That I can't trust myself? That I'd marry and then — then pretty well go mad to think I was married and do anything to get out of it? That all I want, that what I want, Essie, is — is not exactly to marry? Essie, do you understand? That so long as I felt free, perhaps — perhaps — I'd be all right — perhaps be kind?"

He stopped. She was sitting bolt upright, staring straight before her into the night, her pretty lips compressed, and he could hear her breathing — short and quick and sharp.

He said: "Essie, what would you do — what would you do if she told you that?"

She turned sharply towards him. "Do?" cried Essie. He could see how she quivered. "I tell you what I'd do! I'd take my hand and I'd give her such a slap in the face as she wouldn't forget in a hurry, I know!"

He laughed despite himself. But he cried: "If it was true, Essie? If it was true?"

"Give her another!" said Essie. "Such a one!"

Her funny little ways! He gave an exclamation and caught her to him. She was rigid in her indignant heat. He clasped her and turned her face to his. "Oo-oo!" cried Essie, "Oo-oo!" and relaxed, and snuggled, and put her mouth to his. He laughed freely — bitterly — recklessly. How treat her as others than her class should be treated? Why treat her so? He cried: "Essie, you're impossible!" and squeezed her in reproof of her and in helpless desire of her, and cried: "Essie! Essie! Essie!"

She laughed and clung to him; laughed and kissed him kiss for kiss. She said presently, only murmuring, so close their lips: "Wouldn't I just though! Hard as I could I'd fetch her such a couple of slaps! Oo-oo! Oh, I say, Arthur! Why, I never heard such things! I never heard such a caution as she must have been! Jus' because you're quiet, dear — that's what it was. One of that fast lot. That's what she was. Don't I know them, though!"

He was just holding her, kissing her, laughing at her. Why not? He'd not wrong her till she understood — that was his new assurance. At Whitecliffe he'd take her, and tell her there so that not possibly she'd misunderstand him. Not to deceive her — he'd not deceived her yet.

Swiftly deception came.

"Won't we be happy though!"

"Won't we!" he answered her.

"Won't I take care of you just!"

"That's what I want, Essie! That's what I want!"

"Quiet as you like, dear. I shan't mind."

"Essie, I'll make you happy — happy."

"Just think of Mother and Dad when we tell them! They aren't half fond of you, Mother and Dad."

The beginning of it. "We won't tell them — yet," he said.

"What, have a secret?"

"Just for a day or two — just till Whitecliffe."

"Oh, isn't that fine, though, to have it a secret by ourselves!"

"Fine, Essie."

"Not long though. I couldn't keep it above a week!"

"Just a week, Essie."

She was silent a moment, her lips on his. And very silent he.

She said: "You're not really rich, dear?"

"Yes, I am."

"Perhaps you only said it — just because. I know how things pop out. That doesn't matter. Look, I shouldn't be half surprised if Dad'll give you a job of work in his shop when he knows we're engaged."

"It's true, Essie. Rich as rich."

"You've never got as much as fifty pounds?"

"Heaps more than that."

"Oh, if ever! We'll never have a jolly little house of our own?"

"We will, though. A jolly one."

Silent again. She was smiling, dreaming. And silent he. He was thinking, thinking. A striking clock disturbed her. "Eleven! Oh, would you believe it! If we don't hurry, we'll have to tell them — to explain."

"We'll hurry," he said; and he added: "We must keep our secret, Essie."

She was out of his arms in her surprise at the hour.

Something in his voice made her look at him quickly. "There, you're quiet now — like you are sometimes," she said.

He told her "I'm thinking — of you."

At that she suddenly was in his arms again, her hands about his neck. "There's one thing," she whispered and drew down his face. "Oh, there's one thing!"

He asked her "What?"

"Jus' tell me how you love me. You've not said it."

Not to deceive her! "As if I need, Essie?"

"But I want you to. Jus' say it so I can remember it."

Not to deceive her! He stroked her face. "As if I need, Essie! Why should you want me to?"

She told him: "Well, but of course you need. Of course I want you to. Oh, isn't that jus' what a girl wants to hear, Arthur? Why, haven't I laid awake at night, loving you over and over, and thought how it would be to hear you say it! Do jus' say it to me, dear."

Not to deceive her! — not even to pretend he loved her as she understood love! Ah, here at the stake was his vow — caught, brought at last to the burning. Evasions had saved it, hidden it, preserved it to him unbroken: here it was dragged to the open. As he had nerved himself to try to tell her, so now he strengthened himself to hold to his resolution. Ah, as at enticement of her funny little ways he could not resist her, so now, by sudden yearning in her cry, fear to lose her overcame him. She suddenly had change of her fresh young voice; she suddenly, as he waited, and she felt his arms relax, most passionately was pressed against him, and suddenly, with a break, in a cry, entreatingly besought

him: "Ah, do jus' put your arms around me, dear, and hold me close and say you love me. Do!"

Why not? How not? Thrice fool, thrice fool to hesitate! These that she asked were only words, and all his plans and all his happiness at stake upon them. This not the deeper step — nothing irrevocable here. Who, with such as Essie, would scruple as he scrupled? Who such a fool? Who had suffered of life as he had suffered? Who, in his case, would hold away relief as he was holding it? She should decide. He'd hold to that. By God, by God, he'd seal her to him first!

He said: "I love you, Essie."

Holding her, he could feel the sigh she gave run through her as though all her spirit trembled in her ecstasy. She whispered: "Put your face down on mine."

He put his cheek to hers. Her cheek was wet.

"Are you crying, Essie?"

She pressed closer to him.

"Why are you crying?"

She murmured: "Well, haven't I wanted this! Isn't it what I've always wanted! Say it again, dear. With your face on mine and with your arms around me say it."

"I love you, Essie."

Only words — no harm in that. Only words! At Whitecliffe he'd tell her, and she, as he'd sworn, should decide. Only words — only words, but he'd not lose her now!

As they walked home, he posted his letter.

CHAPTER X

THE DREAM

I

"REGISTERED letter for you," cried Essie. "My goodness if there isn't!"

This was in the little sitting-room of the Whitecliffe Sands lodgings — the fifth morning there; Mr. Bickers expected on the morrow; Mr. Wriford, as had been arranged when he was invited for the blow by the sea that would do him a world of good, supposed to be leaving on the same day; and Essie, as they walked the parade together before breakfast, in highest state of excitement and mystification at Arthur's insistence that their secret should be kept till then and then should be revealed — if Essie wished it.

"Well, but aren't you a tease, though!" said Essie delightedly, as this was repeated while they came in to where the registered letter awaited them on the breakfast-table. "Aren't you a fair tease! 'If I want to!' Why, aren't I simply dying to just! I'm simply bursting to tell Mother every single minute. Isn't a secret a caution though — just like when you've got a hole in your dress and think everybody's looking at it. Oh, isn't it funny how you do when you have, though? Let's have a laugh!"

The laughter brought them to the registered letter

and to Essie's exclamation at it; and then, as she handled the packet, readdressed in Mr. Bickers' clerkly script, and gave it to Mr. Wriford: "Feels to me as if some one's sent you a pocket-handkerchief," said Essie.

"That shows you don't know what a honeymoon ticket feels like," said Mr. Wriford and fingered the bundle of banknotes within their parchment cover. "Listen to the crinkling. That's the confetti they always pack it in."

Essie was highly amused. "Hasn't being engaged made you different, though! You're jolly as anything down here. Aren't I glad!"

"It's you that's made me different," Mr. Wriford declared; and "Oo-oo!" cried Essie at what went with this assurance. "Oo-oo! Look out, here's Mother coming."

Mrs. Bickers' appearance, and then all the jolly chatter at breakfast, and afterwards the morning bathe and the rest of the usual programme of Whitecliffe's delights, caused the mysterious registered letter to go — as she would have said — clean out of Essie's head. Mr. Wriford, when he had a moment alone, opened it and read it, and found within it, thrice repeated, a phrase that intensely he chorused as he put letter and the twenty ten-pound notes in his pockets and looked upon the immediate plans that now were all ripe for execution.

II

"Your return to life" was this phrase that the literary agent three times repeated in the course of his enthusiastic delight and surprise at news at last of missing Mr. Wriford. He gave some astonishing figures of the

sales of Mr. Wriford's books. He put forward what appeared to him the most engaging of the contracts which publishers were longing to make. He ended with How soon would Mr. Wriford run up to town for a talk? or should Mr. Lessingham come down? "Don't let your return to life — now that at last you have made it — give me a moment's longer silence than you can help."

"Return to life" — that was the phrase. Essie's words — "Hasn't being engaged made you different, though?" — that was the illustration of it. Return to life! Ay, that was it, ay, that was his, far, far more truly, with wonder of rebirth immeasurably more, than ever Lessingham or any one in all the world could know. There was thrill in that very thought that none but himself knew its heights, its volume, its singing, its radiant intensity. That knowledge was his own as in the immediate future his life was to be his own — life without a care, life without a tie, life of complete abandonment to pleasure of work, to pleasure of sheer pleasure, to pleasure of jolly little Essie always to turn to, to look after, to make happy, and yet always to know of her that if he wished — he never would so wish — he could be rid of her: no tie, no bond — happiness, freedom; freedom, happiness!

This was the state to which, with a sudden, ecstatic soaring as it were, he had swung away from the evening of saying "I love you, Essie," and of posting his letter, through these laughing days at Whitecliffe Sands, to now when arrival of the honeymoon ticket made him all ready for the final step. Once that declaration of the love he did not feel — as Essie understood love — had been made, his scrupulous withholding from it lay

strewn about his feet as matter of no more regard than the torn wrappings of a casket from which there has been taken a very precious prize. That declaration sealed her to him; and through those intervening days while the letter was awaited, constantly he repeated it, constantly embellished it. He mocked, he almost upbraided himself for his old scruples at it. Why, it was her due, her right, he told himself. She should be happy with him — that was his resolve: never should regret, never suffer. Why, how possibly could she be happy, how avoid pains of regret, if she were not assured that he loved her?

So he gave her this bond — that was her due — of his love; so with each day, each hour, each moment of Whitecliffe in her company he became more and more assured of her. Assured! He was convinced. There was not a glance from her eyes, not a sound from her lips, not a touch of her hand but informed him that she was his to do with as he would, come any test that he might put her to. Return to life! Why, this freedom, this happiness, was but the threshold of it. Return to life! He imaged all the darkness he had come through and damned it in exultant triumph at all its terrors trampled under foot: night, darker than deepest summer darkness here, he had known; day, of which these burning cloudless days of holiday were sign and symbol, now was his, and brighter still awaited him. . . .

Whitecliffe Sands, anxious to present to its visitors every attraction and convenience that may place it among rising seaside resorts, numbers among the latter a Tourist Bureau in the High Street where, so an inscription informs you, you may book in advance to any railway station in the British Isles. On the morning

of the arrival of the registered letter, Mr. Wriford stepped in here and took for to-morrow two first-class tickets to London: a fast train at five o'clock in the afternoon, he was told.

III

The morrow brought Mr. Bickers at midday, Mrs. Bickers and Mr. Wriford and Essie at the station to meet him, Essie in his arms and hugging him with delighted cries of joy before he is well out of the train. It is a thing to make all who stand about on the platform desist from their own greetings to see her slim young figure in its pretty white dress flash forward as the train comes in, and to smile at her cry of "There he is! Oh, jus' look at his summer waistcoat he's got!" and then to see her in his arms with "Oh, Dad! Oh, if you don't look a darling in that waistcoat! Wherever did you get it, though?"

Most wonderfully animated she is, most radiantly pretty. Mr. Bickers, after affectionate greeting of his wife, and to Mr. Wriford most genial "Hullo, Arthur! All right? That's the way! Glad to see you again, Arthur," watches her adoringly where she has returned to his carriage with "I'll get your bag, Dad!" and says: "Doesn't she look a picture, our Essie! Doesn't Whitecliffe suit our Essie!"

Most wonderfully animated she is, most radiantly pretty — chattering; walking with gay little skips as she holds Dad's hand while they proceed to the lodgings; carrying them all with her a dozen times on her irresistible appeal of: "Oh, isn't that funny, though! Let's have a laugh," before the lodgings are reached.

It is much more than Whitecliffe's breezes that make her thus, much more than joy at Dad's arrival: it is that this is To-day, the promised day — the secret come to bursting-point, and to burst out in all its wonder at any moment that Mr. Wriford may choose to relieve the almost unbearable excitement and mystery and tell her it may be told. "Feels to me like all the birthdays I ever had all rolled into one," Essie had declared to Mr. Wriford early that morning. "If you'd seen me jump out of bed when I woke up! Oh, just think when we tell them! Will it be when Dad arrives at the station? Well, at lunch, then?" And when Mr. Wriford smiles and shakes his head at each of these, "Well, but they think you're going to-day! Oh, if ever I knew any one love a mystery like you do!"

"I'll tell you when," says Mr. Wriford. "I'll tell you all of a sudden." For him also it is the day — the promised day — awaited thus with deliberate purpose, and he a little nervous, a little restless, something ill at ease now that its hour swiftly comes.

"You're never going to keep it till the very last minute just before they think you're going? My goodness, I couldn't bear it. I'll simply scream. I know I shall."

"Look here, Essie, I'll tell you. I'm going by the five o'clock train to London —"

Essie corrects him. "You mean that's what you'll say you are. Oh, how ever I won't scream I can't think!"

"Well, just before that we'll say we're going for a last walk together — for me to say good-bye to everything; and then we'll arrange how to — tell them."

She clapped her hands and laughed with glee. "If

you're not a caution, Arthur! Oh, how ever I won't scream before five o'clock! Oh, when we tell them!"

At five o'clock she was to be lying still, with silent lips: he on his knees: death waiting.

CHAPTER XI

THE BUSINESS

I

"YOU'RE never going to keep it till the very last minute?" Essie had said. Mr. Wriford's plan rested for its actual execution upon this very fact of keeping it till the very last minute — from her. Essie had thrilled with the delicious mystification of "They think you're going to-day." It was his carefully deliberated project suddenly to spring upon her that indeed he was going to-day — and then to ask her: "I'm going, Essie — by this train — I'm not going back to say good-bye — I'm going now — for ever. Essie, are you coming with me?"

Thus was she suddenly to be presented with it. Thus was she to decide — flatly, immediately. She was to know what sort of union he intended. She was either to fear it and let him go from her — as he would go — at once and for ever; or of her love for him he was to carry her with him — immediately, to have always for his own!

Let Essie decide! He was holding to that. With Essie let the decision be! All he was doing was to present the decision to her sharp and clear and sudden: all he had done was to tell her that he loved her. But there resulted to him this: that between the sharpness

of the decision she was to make and the love he had pressed upon her in these intervening Whitecliffe days, between the effects of these on such as Essie was, he was certain of her, convinced of her: so utterly assured of her that as, after lunch, they left the house for that last walk in which he was "to say good-bye to everything," he told Mr. and Mrs. Bickers: "Don't be anxious if we're not back by half-past four. There's another train at seven. I can just as well go by that if we find we want to stop out a bit;" so certain of her that, as they left the house, "Bring a warm wrap of some kind," he said to Essie. "Bring that long cloak of yours."

"Why, it's as hot as anything!" Essie protested. But the agonies of "nearly screaming" in which she had sat through lunch while Mother and Dad said how sorry they were Arthur was going, and that if the job of work he was after fell through he was to be sure and let them know at once — the agonies of enduring this without screaming, made it, as she told him when they were started, impossible "to stand there arguing on the steps with them watching us, so I've got to lug this along, and don't I look half a silly carrying it either, all along the parade too!"

"I'll carry it," said Mr. Wriford and took the cloak; "and we won't keep along the parade. We'll go that walk of ours in towards Yexley Green and round by that white house with the jolly garden and come out on to the cliff. That'll give us plenty of time to get back."

Essie laughed and skipped. "Plenty of time! How you can keep it up like that I can't think. My goodness, if you oughtn't to be on the stage! Hope you like carrying that cloak!"

"Well, there'll be a shower or two, I shouldn't be surprised," said Mr. Wriford. "Anyway, it'll do to sit down on when we get over to the cliff and sit down — to arrange."

II

This white house with the jolly garden that was to be the turning-point of their walk had come to be quite a place of pilgrimage since its chance discovery on the first morning of the holiday. "Whitehouse" was its name. It was tenantless. An auctioneer's placard announced that it was for sale. They had walked far along the cliffs from Whitecliffe Sands on that first morning, had taken a winding lane that led to Yexley Green, and in the lane suddenly had come upon Whitehouse, with which immediately Essie, and Mr. Wriford scarcely less, had fallen most encaptivatingly in love. A high wall surrounded it. They had explored its garden: kitchen garden with fruit trees; and a bit of lawn with a shady old elm; and enticing odd little bits of garden tucked here and there behind shrubberies and in corners; and a little stable — at the stable Mr. Wriford had said: "That's where you'd keep a fat little pony, Essie, and have one of those jolly little governess cars and drive into Whitecliffe every day to do the shopping." And "Oh, if ever!" Essie had cried delightedly; and immediately and thenceforward the thing had been to come here every day and imagine Whitehouse was theirs and plan the garden — sadly neglected — as they would have it if it were. One storey high, the house, and white, and "sort of bulging, the darling," as Essie had said, with the effect that the three ground-

floor rooms and even the kitchen at the back were spaci-ously circular in shape. High French windows — “My goodness, though, if there aren’t more windows than walls almost!” Encircled all about by a wide, paved verandah.

“It’s the very house for an author,” Mr. Wriford had declared. “Shut away from everything by that jolly old wall, Essie; and this room — come and look at this room, Essie — this would be mine where I’d write. It must get the sun pretty well all day, and it’s sort of away from the others — quite quiet. Couldn’t I write in there!”

Essie with her nose flat against the window: “Oh, wouldn’t it be glorious! Can’t I just see you sitting in there writing a book! Perhaps I’d be out on the verandah here with a little dog that I’d have and just have a peep at you sometimes!”

To-day as they came by Whitehouse and turned towards the cliffs there was a sudden development of these imaginative ecstasies. The showers that Mr. Wriford had foreboded, heralded by watery clouds trailing up from the west, approached in quickening drops of heavy rain as they came through Yexley Green. They were at Whitehouse when sudden midsummer downpour broke and descended.

“My goodness!” cried Essie.

“We’ll shelter in the porch — in the verandah,” said Mr. Wriford and opened the gate. “Run, Essie!”

In the porch, Essie breathless and laughing from their helter-skelter rush, and shaking the raindrops from her skirts, Mr. Wriford read again a duplicate of the auctioneer’s notice posted at the gate. He came to the last words and read them aloud with exclamation.

" 'Open to view!' Essie, if we haven't been donkeys all this time! I believe it's — " He turned the handle of the door. " It is. It's open! "

" Oo-oo! " cried Essie, clasping her hands in delight, flashing her sparkling eyes all about the wide hall — its white panelling, its inglenook fireplace, its room-doors standing ajar with captivating peeps of interiors even more entrancing than when seen from outside, its low, spacious stairway bending up to the first floor — " Oh, if ever! Oh, Arthur, if it isn't a darling! "

At the cliffs — and they had been within five minutes of them when the rain came — he had planned they should sit down and he would tell her: " I'm going by the five o'clock train. Here's my ticket. Essie, are you coming with me? Look, here's yours. " The diversion of being within enchanting Whitehouse, his laughter at Essie's ecstasies as from room to room they went, momentarily forgot him his purpose — and yet, and partly of envisaging within these perfect surroundings the very joy, settled with Essie in dwelling-place so conducive to work and happiness as this, that soon should be his, brought him (and her) directly to it.

With light and trifling steps they suddenly were plunged amidst it. The exploration, twice repeated, was done. Essie was in ecstasies anew over the sitting-room, of which Mr. Wriford told her again: " Yes, this would be yours. That's the dining-room behind, you see, with a door to the kitchen where your servants would be. "

" Not really two servants? " said Essie.

" Oh, rather — three perhaps; and then the gardener chap who'd look after your pony-trap. "

"Oh, my goodness!" said Essie, sparkling. "Do just go on, dear!"

"Yes, well, this would be yours. We wouldn't call it the drawing-room or any rot like that. Just your room with jolly furniture and a little bureau where you'd keep your accounts. We'd have tea in here when we didn't have it outside. The servants would call it the sitting-room. We'd call it jolly little Essie's room. I'd get fed up with working sometimes, you know, and come and sprawl about in here. You'd be sewing or something, I expect."

Essie had no expression for all this but an enormous sigh of ecstasy. Then she said: "Now we'll go back to yours," and hand in hand they came to it — and to their reckoning.

III

"Simply built for a chap to write in," Mr. Wriford said. "Just look how it gets the sun. It's stopped raining. I'd come here directly after breakfast. That's the time I can write. There's where I'd have my table. You'd see I was kept quiet."

"Oh, wouldn't I just," said Essie. "You see, there's a passage comes right down to this door, and my goodness if I saw any of the servants come past that corner there, or even go into the room overhead! My goodness, they'd know it if they did!"

He put his arm about her shoulders and laughed and pressed her to him; and Essie said: "Oh, just fancy if it really could be ours!"

He kept her there. She in his arm, they in surround-

ings such as these: he working, she ministering to him — ah, return to life! return to life!

"Well, we'll have a place as like it as we can find," he said.

She shook her head. With just a little sigh, "We never could," she said. "We'll be happier than anything wherever we are; but one thing, there couldn't be another darling place like this, and another, it would cost a fair fortune. Why, it's not even to let. It's only for sale."

He told her easily: "That's all right. That's just what we're going to do — buy a little place somewhere. I bet a thousand would buy this Whitehouse, buried away down here."

Essie made a tremendous mouthful of the word: "Well, a *thousand!*"

He laughed and squeezed her in reproof again. "Or two," he said. "Won't you ever understand what they pay for what you call the silly books?"

She had protested before, when in these Whitecliffe days he had assured her of his identity with Philip Wriford, that she never would have said silly in the library that evening if she had known the book was his "really." She protested now again with a wriggle and a laugh; but quickly upon her protest looked up at him with: "Oh, you can't ever mean that you really could buy this? You simply can't?"

He nodded, smiling.

"Oh," she cried, "why not then? Why not? Oh, Arthur, just think if you would! Oh, jus' think!"

The smile went from his lips and from his eyes. Whitehouse, so near to Mother and Dad, was impossible. Flight must take them, and keep them, very far from

here. Before he could speak it was this very fact of proximity to home that she adduced in further persuasion.

"And think," she cried, "how near we'd be to Mother and Dad! Jus' an hour in the train. I could see them every week. I expect you've thought they'd live with us, you being so rich. But they never would, you know. Dad would never leave his shop, one thing; and another, Mother's often said when we've talked about me getting married one day, that a girl ought to have a home of her own and not have her mother tied round her neck. Why, this would be perfect, this darling Whitehouse, and so close to them! Oh, if you really can, Arthur!"

Here was the telling of it.

"I can't," he said. "We can't live here, Essie."

She detected something amiss in his tone. There went out of her face the fond and smiling entreaty expressive of her plea. She said: "Arthur, why?"

To one of the windows there was a broad window-seat, and he took her to it. "Let's sit down here, Essie."

She said: "Oh, whatever is it, dear?"

He took her hand. "It's this. What I told your father and mother about going by the five o'clock train is true. I am going. It's nearly four now. It's time to be starting back. I am going. Look, here's my ticket."

Wonderingly she looked at it, and at him. "Oh, you can't be?"

"I am. There's the ticket. Essie, look. Here's yours."

She almost laughed. She looked at his face and the impulse was checked. But she said half-laughingly,

her brows prettily puckered: "Oh, whatever? Is it a game, dear, you're having?"

"No, it's no game. It's very serious. I'm going — for good. Not coming back — ever."

She made a little distressful motion with her hands. "Oh, Arthur, don't go on so, dear. Whatever can you mean?"

"I mean just what I say. I'm going — at five o'clock." He stopped and looked intently into her wondering, her something shadowed, eyes. He said: "Essie, are you coming with me?"

This time she laughed. It obviously was a game! A little ring of her clear and merry laughter, and her eyes that always sparkled, that had been shadowed, sparkling anew. "Oh, if you oughtn't to be an actor on the stage! If you didn't half frighten me, though!" and she laughed again. "Why, how could I come? Why, we're not married yet!"

Now!

He put an arm about her and drew her to him. "Don't let me frighten you, Essie. Trust me. Trust me. Come with me, Essie. I'll take care of you. I'll love you always. You'll never regret it — not a moment. You know what I can do for you — everything you want. You know how happy we'll be — happy, happy."

He had imagined — he had prepared for — everything that she might say: fears, tears, doubts, protests — he had rehearsed his part, his fond endearments, his dear cajoleries, against them all. He was utterly unprepared for her answer, for the gentle puzzlement in her eyes that went with it, for the Sunday-school awe in her voice with which she spoke it.

"What, live in sin?" said Essie.

He was prepared for, he had rehearsed, every way this telling of her might go. Across any difficulties of it he had stepped to the utter conviction of her that, howsoever it went, would radiantly end it, he knew. He was utterly unprepared for this her first contribution to it, for each and all with which she followed it, for the sudden fear, and then the quickly mounting fear, and then the knowledge, that she was lost to him — that the game was up, the thing done, the plans shattered, the future irrevocably destroyed: he was most unprepared of all, as the knowledge came and grew and burned within him, for the fury that began to fill him at his loss, the fury and the hate that finally he broke upon her. And God, God, how vilely quickly the thing was projected, was fought, was done! In one minute, as it seemed to him, they were lovingly trifling their plans of Whitehouse; in the next, those very plans had swept him to the telling; in the next, return to life was crushed like ashes in his mouth, and his fury and hate were out and raging; in the next, they were back returning on the cliffs, a blustering wind got up, rain again streaming.

Look how it went. Consider the quickness of it.

"What, live in sin?"

He caught her to him. "Live together, live together, Essie — always. Don't talk about sin."

"How could I? Oh, how ever could I?"

"Together, together, Essie! Think of us together in a little house of our own just like this. Think of you looking after me, and of me looking after my sweet, my dear, my darling!"

"How could I, dear? How could I?"

"Trust me — trust me! Ah, those tears in my darling's darling eyes! Look how I kiss them away and hold her in my arms and always hold her."

"I couldn't, dear. I couldn't."

"You know I'm different. You know how different I am from other men. That's why I ask you, why I take you, without marrying you. Does it frighten you at first? Only at first. You know I'm different. You know you trust me."

"Oh, you don't love me! You don't love me, after all!"

Chill at his heart.

"I can't live without you, Essie."

"Oh, you couldn't ask me to live in sin, not if you loved me."

Swift fear that he has lost her.

"It is because I love you. Because I love you."

"Oh, didn't I love to think you loved me, Arthur! You don't. You don't."

Losing her! The knowledge loses him the ardour of his words, halts him and stumbles him among them.

"You're silly, you're silly to talk like that!"

"Oh, didn't I think you loved me truly!"

Lost her! He knows it. He feels it. There is something in her simple, plaintive exclamations, in her "I couldn't, couldn't, dear," in her abandonment to belief that he cannot love her — there is some damned, numbing essence in it that emanates as it were from her spirit and thus informs him; and thus informing him, numbs and dumbs his own. Lost her! And cannot combat it. Lost her! And has no words, no help. Fury beginning in him. Fury at his impotence mounting within him. Return to life! By God, by God, to lose it!

"Essie, will you let me go, then? Now? For ever? You can't. All our love? All our happiness we're going to have?"

"Oh, didn't I think you loved me truly!"

Fury within him. That maddening iteration of her maddening cry! He can scarcely retain his fury. He chokes it back. He is hoarse as he grinds out words. "Think of us in a little house like we've planned."

"I couldn't, dear, I couldn't!"

"Think how we'll have everything we want!"

"Oh, I can't bear to hear you tempting me!"

Fury in a storm breaks out of him. "Oh!" he cries and makes a savage action with his arms that thrusts her from him. "Oh, for God Almighty's sake, don't drag the Bible into it!"

She says: "Arthur!"

He gets violently to his feet, his hands clenched, and makes again that savage, breaking action of his arms, and cries at her: "Temptation and sin and rubbish, rubbish, like that! Let it alone! If you don't love me, say so! If you're going to let me go, say so! Don't drag the Bible into it! If you don't love me, say so, say so, say so!"

"Arthur, you know I love you. You don't love me, dear!"

A last effort. A last control of his fury. He turns to her. "Essie, I can't live without you. Essie! Essie!"

"Oh, you couldn't love me to ask me to live in sin!"

That ends it. That expression — its beastly and vulgar piety, its common, vulgar phraseology — sweeps across his fury as in a rasping shudder of abhorrence. He breaks his fury out upon it. He bursts out: "By God, you're common, common! Do you think I'd

marry you — *you*? What do you think you are? Who do you think I am? Marry you! Marry *you*! Let's get out of this! Let's go home, and you can tell your father and your mother!"

Return to life! Gone, gone! Lost, lost! He was shaking with hate and shaking with utter fury. He walked to the door and staggered as he walked and must stop and correct his direction as though he were drunken. At the door he turned to her and saw that she remained seated, leaning back against the window, her hands clasped. He cried: "Are you coming? Are you coming?"

She got up and came to him and went through the doorway before him and through the outer door. He slammed it behind him, and they passed out from Whitehouse and up the lane, and out upon the cliffs and turned along them homeward. Raining. He carried her cloak but did not offer it her. A wind blew gustily from off the land that frequently buffeted him, and her, and at whose buffetings and at the slippery foothold of the rain-swept grass he angrily exclaimed.

IV

She walked to seaward of him close along the cliff's edge. Here the cliff fell sharply a few feet, then overhung an outward lap of gorse and bracken, sheer then to the sands. Once as they pressed and slipped their way along, he caught her eyes. She was crying. He sneered: "You can tell your father and mother!"

She caught her breath to answer him: "As if — I should!"

"What are you crying about, then?"

"Didn't I think you loved me — truly!"

They were approaching the little coastguard station of Yexley Gap. Damn this rain. Damn this slippery grass. Damn this infernal wind. A fiercer gust came blustering seaward. He caught with both hands at his hat — nearly gone. Essie's cloak upon his arm blew across his eyes — blinded him, and he had to stop.

She didn't scream. It was not a cry. She just, in perplexity, in puzzlement, in trouble as it were, said "*Arthur!*"

She was balancing. She was struck by the wind and balancing — balancing with her body and with her arms, and looking at him as if she did not quite know what was happening to her; and in the like perplexity said to him "*Arthur!*" — balancing, over-balancing.

There were not ten feet between them. He rushed, and slipped as he rushed. It was like running with those leaden feet of nightmare. It seemed to him an immense time before he reached her. A horrible, blundering, unspeakable business, then. The cloak, the accursed cloak, got between them — between them. A jumbling, ghastly, blundering business, their hands fumbling on either side of it. Was this going on for ever and ever? The accursed cloak fumbled itself away. Ah, God, now it was their naked hands that were fumbling — all wet and slippery with rain, seeming to be all fists and no fingers and only knocking against one another instead of catching hold. And not a word said, and only very quick breathing, and jumbling and fumbling and jumbling. Look here, this fumbling, she's falling, toppling; is this going on for ever and ever and ever?

It was her hands that in the last wild, hideous fumbling clutched his. She toppled right back. He fell. He was face downwards upon the slippery grass, to his waist almost over the cliff, and slipping, slipping, and she had his hands — the backs of his hands over the knuckles so that his fingers were imprisoned and useless, and there she hung and dragged him, and he was slipping.

He said: "O God, Essie! O God! Can't you get your hands higher up, so I can hold you, instead of you holding me?"

She said: "I shall fall if I do."

He said: "My darling! My darling! Hold on, then, Essie. Dig your nails in."

"Am I hurting you?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Essie, hold, hold!"

Next she said: "Are you slipping?"

He said: "Some one will come. Some one will come. I heard a shout. Hold! Hold!"

She persisted: "Are you slipping?"

He said: "Yes. I'm slipping. Hold! Hold!"

There isn't any need to describe anything — of his gradual slipping by her drag upon him, of his useless hands enviced in hers, of her very terrible clutch upon them.

She presently said: "Tell me that what you said on the seat that night, dear."

He knew. He cried most passionately: "I love you, Essie."

"Truly?"

From the uttermost depths of his heart: "Truly! Truly!"

"More than any one?"

From his soul, from all his deepest depths, from all he ever had suffered, from all he ever had been, "Essie," he cried, "before God I love you more than all the world!"

She said: "You can't raise me to kiss me, can you, dear?"

He said: "I can't, Essie."

"Are you slipping?"

He did not answer her. He was slipped almost beyond recovery.

She then said: "Say that again — 'before God.' I like that, dear."

"Essie, Essie, before God I love you above all the world!"

She gave a little sigh. She said: "Well, both of us — what's the sense to it, dear?" and she opened her fingers, and he saw her whizz, strike the face of the cliff where it jutted out, and pitch, and crash among the gorse and bracken, and roll over and over to the very edge of the outward lap above the sands, and caught there and lying there . . . her jolly little dress for Whitecliffe lying there.

A hand grabbed him, or he, beyond recovery of his balance, had followed her. A coastguard grabbed him and dragged him back. He said in a thick, odd voice: "What the devil's the use of that now? You fool, what the devil's the use of that?"

He lay there, the rain stopped, in the sunshine. He just lay there — a minute, an hour, a year, a lifetime, eternity? They went down — a circuitous path to where she lay. They brought her up. They carried her, on a shutter, past him. He gave some wordless

sound from his lips and scrambled on his knees towards their burden and threw his arms about it and clung there, with wordless sounds.

One man said: "She's alive, sir."

Another man said: "We'd best try to get her home before —"

A third man said: "Can you walk to show us the way?"

He got up and went stumbling along.

CHAPTER XII

THE SEEING

THEY carry her to her room. There is only one doctor in Whitecliffe. He is found and fetched; and leaving Mr. and Mrs. Bickers by the bedside, comes down to the sitting-room where is a man stunned to apparent speechlessness by grief, whom he takes to be the patient's brother. The doctor says he will stay till the end, and for "the end" then substitutes "for the night." There is nothing he can do immediately and by himself. He speaks of the possibility of an operation in the morning, but seemingly has no thought of telegraphing to a surgeon he names who could perform it. She will pass away without recovery of consciousness, he fears. There is not only the injury to her head but of her spine. More than that there is the question of — If the case had been taken to the hospital at Market Redding. . . . The man whom he takes to be her brother drags with blundering fingers from his pocket a packet of bank-notes and thrusts them towards him with a curious action — an action suggestive (were not the idea ridiculous) of their being some horrible thing.

Well, are they not the price of her that was to buy her?

Taking the packet, the doctor flushes. He had judged these people by the rooms they occupy — a clumsy thing to do at the seaside where frequently people must

take what accommodation they can find. This man's educated bearing, perceptible despite the grief that scarcely enables him to speak, should have informed him of his mistake. Very well, he will telegraph. He cannot hold out much hope. But convey hope to those poor old folk up-stairs. Indeed, of course one knows of cases. . . . In these days of aeroplanes one hears of cases where terrible falls, long periods of unconsciousness, have been survived. Eh? Still — and though he is alone in the sitting-room with this the poor girl's brother he drops his voice and tells him. . . .

She lies in her room, Mother and Dad with her. She lies there unconscious and only, under God, to wake to die. He that had stumbled before her bier, directing those who bore her, stumbles now from the house. "Kill me! Kill me!" Ah, cry that pulses as a wound within him; that he desires to cry aloud, and would cry aloud, and does wordlessly groan with his breathing. But there is agony that he endures that of speech bereaves him, of power of movement wherewith to carry out what now alone remains, numbs and denies him. There is a seat without the house upon the parade. He drops upon it, and there endures . . . and there endures. . . .

Endures! It is as if there had been discovered to him within him some vital core, some spot, some nucleus of life, some living soul and centre of him, capable of receiving the very quick and apotheosis of torture, such as all his normal body and all his normal mind delivered over to rack and irons could not have felt. There is a point in human pain where pain, numbing the centres of the mind, mercifully defeats itself and can no more. There is discovered to him within him a core, a quick,

an essence of him, capable of agony to infinity, down into which, as a blunted knife, drives every thought in writhing agony. In physical agony he writhes beneath them, twisting his legs, driving his nails within his palms, bleeding with his teeth his lips.

In that flash while she fell, and falling saved him: "She has given her life for mine!" In that hour, that age, that all eternity of time while, prone and powerless, rescued upon the cliff he lay: "Twice, twice, I look upon a body lifeless to let mine live!" In that stumbling progression before her bier: "Kill me! Kill me! O vile, O worst, O foulest, unnameable thing, betake thyself to hell, if any hell be vile enough to hold thee!"

Revelation! Revelation! As she fell, as he lay, as he stumbled, as here he writhes in agony — revelation — and all his life in terrible review beneath it. "Kill me! Kill me!" he groans. "O vile, O worst, O foulest, unnameable thing, betake thyself to hell, if any hell be vile enough to hold thee!"

"Not so. Not yet," there answers him. It is as though there speak to him his thoughts with voice that peals imperatively through all his being, reverberating through him in tremendous majesty of doom, as through the aisles reverberates and makes to tremble all the air an organ's swelling thunder.

"Not so! Not yet! Thou hast not strength to move to find thy hell. Rise if thou canst. Stay, for thou must. Revelation is here. Behold thy life beneath it!"

He crouches there. Enormously it thunders all about him. "Revelation! O blind, O purblind miserable! Have not a thousand lights been thrust before thee to proclaim thee this that only now thou seest? Thou seeker after happiness! Thou greatly-to-be-pitied!

Thou sufferer! Thou victim of affliction! Thou innocent! Thou greatly wronged! Is it thus thou hast seen thyself? Ah, whining wretch that thou hast been! Ah, blind, ah, purblind fool, that could not see! That first must have a life to show thee! That first must send to death he that in daily sacrifices of thy companionship had shown thee happiness was sacrifice! Blind, blind! Thou must demand death of him to try to rend thy blindness, and still wast blind, still cried to heaven of thy misery, still wast of all men most to be pitied, most oppressed! Ah, whining wretch! To her for more revelation thou must come. By her, daily, hourly revelation is thrust before thee — she, that gay, that sweet, that joyous life, whose every single, smallest thought was thought for others, and still, O soul enmired, enmeshed in blindness, thou couldst not see! — still thou must have the deeper sacrifice! One life doth not suffice thee. Another thou must have. And now thou criest: 'Revelation! Revelation!' What cost? Look, look, thou vilest, now that thine eyes are clear, now that thy soul is stirred at last from all the slime of self, self, self, where thou hast kept it — look now, and count the cost of this thy revelation. Look now! Hold up thy shuddering soul, new from its slime, to look how all thy life is strewn with sacrifices made for thee, how at each step, blind, thou hast demanded more; how two whose every slightest breath was more of beauty than all thy years have made, how two were given thee; how in thy blindness thou rebukedst them both in each devotion, in every act of love, of care, and must press on to have their lives, their broken bodies — he by the sea, she by the cliff — for this thy revelation."

Day comes to evening, evening reaches into night.

"Kill me! Kill me!" he moans. "O vile, O worst, O foulest thing, O blind, let me betake myself to hell, if any hell be vile enough to hold me!"

There answers him in dreadful summons, in final roll and crash of sound: "Look back. Look back. Thou hast purchased this thy revelation. Thou hast recovered from its slime thy soul. Two lives and boundless love thou hast demanded for it. Thy price is paid. Look back, look back. Hold up that soul of thine and see the way that thou hast come. Then seek thy hell, if hell will have thee. Hold up thy soul!"

The sound is snatched away. Only its resonance remains, and sharp and piercing streams the air it leaves to silence. In that intensity with new eyes he looks back; and now into this quick, this nucleus of life within him that is made capable of pain transcending human pain, receives each vision that his new eyes reveal. In agony receives them, writhing at their torture. Who had been happy? They that had sacrificed! Happy till when? Till he came! Happy in what? In selflessness, in selflessness. . . . Who had been happy? That uncouth vagabond that in their every moment together had tended him, cared for him, protected him. O blind, that, mired in self, never till now had realised his strong devotion! In shame, in horror, in grief's abandonment, he cries aloud his uncouth name: "Puddlebox! Puddlebox! For me! O God, for me!" Writhing, he hears his jolly voice: "O ye tired strangers of the Lord: bless ye the Lord." Hears his jolly voice: "Down, loony, down!". . . That was on the wagon, receiving blows that he might escape! . . . Hears his jolly voice: "You think too much about yourself, boy, and therefore I name you spooked.". . . O blind, O

blind that all his life had thought too much about himself, and only of himself — thought only of how to win his own happiness, realised never till now that happiness was in making others happy, and nowhere else, and nowhere else! . . . Hears his jolly voice: "Wherefore whatsoever comes against me, boy — heat, cold; storm, shine; hunger, fullness; pain, joy — cause for praise I find in them all and therefore sing: 'O ye world of the Lord; bless ye the Lord.'" . . . O blind, blind, that many weeks lived with that creed and never till now realised its meaning. . . . Hears his jolly voice: "I like you, boy." . . . Hears his jolly voice: "Why, what to the devil is the sense of it, boy?" — but doing it, following it, for him! . . . O blind, O blind! . . . Hears his jolly voice: "I'm to you now, boy! I'm to you, boy. Why, that's my loony!" . . . Hears his jolly voice: "Wedge in, boy! Wedge in! Swim! Why, I'd swim that rotten far with my hands tied, and I challenge you or any man — " . . . Sees him swing off his hands, and drop, and go, and drown, and die. . . . O blind, blind, blind!

Deep swings the night about him; deep sounds the murmuring sea. "Kill me! Kill me!" he groans. "O vile, O worst, O foulest thing, let me betake myself to hell, if any hell be vile enough to hold me!"

There answers him: "Not so. Not yet. Look back. Look back. Hold up thy soul, new from its slime of self, self, self, and look along the way that thou hast come. Hold up thy soul and look!"

He is searching, he is searching in the days at Pendra. He is wondering, he is wondering. Is there some secret of happiness in life that he has missed? O blind, O purblind in the face of God! Day and night, by count-

less love, by endless devotion, the secret had been thrust before him. Blind! Of self alone he had thought. The last, the uttermost sacrifice had been presented him. Blind! Enmired, enmeshed in self, it had shown him nothing, left him still whimpering, still wondering, still seeking, still pitying his fate. Who had been happy? Essie! Essie! Happy till when? Till he came! Happy in what? In selflessness! Blind! O blindness black beyond belief, now that with new eyes he sees it. Puddlebox had shown him. Essie not alone had shown him but had told him. On that day of the depth of his misery at the Tower House School, when she had helped and advised him by telling of her way with her own Sunday-school boys: "You jus' try it," she had said. "I mean to say, whatever's the good of anybody if they don't try to make everybody else happy, is there? You jus' try." He had tried. He had made the boys happy. Himself he had touched happiness in theirs. O blind, O blind! She had given the very secret of happiness into his hands, and he had used it and proved it and yet, so chained in self, had never recognised it, but had pressed on for further proof. On past her "Aren't you quiet, though, sometimes? I don't mind, dear." On past her "Oh, won't I keep you quiet just when you're working!" On to her piteous cry: "Oh, didn't I think you loved me truly!" On, on, voracious in his blindness as vampire in its lust, on, on, demanding yet another life until she says: "Well, both of us, dear, what's the sense to it?" Until she lies there, broken, that he might live. Until she lies here unconscious and only, under God, to wake to die.

"Kill me! Kill me!" he groans. "Let me find hell, if any hell is vile enough to hold me. Let me not live

but to create hell here on earth for all who come about me. "O ye world of the Lord: bless ye the Lord." He had crushed out that praise. "Let's have a laugh!" He had crushed out that laughter.

Kill himself. That was left. That was all. Ah, if he had but killed himself when, on that night countless ages of changed identity ago, he had thrown himself into the river! Who had been saved had he not lived? What of delight had he not robbed the world had he not trailed across it? Who had been saved? Old Puddlebox — old Puddlebox had been alive, jovial, genial, praising. Essie — Essie had been alive, laughing, loving, streaming her sunshine. Who would have missed him? None, none, for there was none in all his life he had brought happiness.

Was there none, indeed? What is this sudden apprehension as of some new dismay that checks and holds him? What new revelation of his depths has that question unlocked, unloosed upon him? What change, what agony is here? What bursts within his heart? What seems to struggle in the air to reach him? What sweeps across that quick, that nucleus of life, that core, that essence, that as deep waters takes his breath and holds him trembling where till now in torture he has writhed?

"Matey! Matey!"

"Captain! Captain!"

Ah, tumult inexpressible as of bursting floods rushing in mist and spray from bondage; ah, surging of immensity of thoughts, of visions. Missed him had he died? There was one, there was one had lost a little happiness had he died when he had tried to die. "Captain! Captain!"

He hears his voice as he had heard it in the ward:
"Matey! Matey! Gor' bless yer, Matey!"

He turns about on the seat. He throws his arms upon its rail. He buries his face upon them.

There is a step across the road. A hand touches him.
"Arthur? Is that you, Arthur?"

Mr. Bickers, bending above him.

"Is she dead?"

"She's still unconscious. I'm anxious for Mrs. Bickers, Arthur. I want to take her to lie down a little. Would you just come and watch in case our Essie wakes?"

He gets up and goes with Mr. Bickers to the house.

CHAPTER XIII

PRAYER OF MR. WRIFORD

I

Look where she lies. Never to wake? Unconscious, and only, under God, to wake to die? Surely she but reposes, smiling, smiling there? Look where her face, surrounded by her hair, rests there untouched by scratch or mark or bruise. Surely she only sleeps; and sleeping, surely still pursues those gay young fancies of her joyous life: look how they seem to smile upon those soft, expressive lips of hers. Look where she lies. Look how her tender form, hid of its suffering, lies there so slim and shapely beneath the wrappings drawn about her. Look at her hands, each slightly closed, that lie upon her breast: surely to touch them is to feel responsive their firm, cool clasp? surely to touch them is to wake her? Look where she lies. Never to wake? Unconscious, and only, under God, to wake to die? Surely she but reposes, smiling, smiling there?

Look where she lies. This is her room. Look where here, and here, and here, and here, are all her little trinkets, treasures, trifles, she has brought with her from home for this her jolly holiday. These are her portraits here, in those plush frames, of Mother and of Dad. That is her text she has illumined, taken from her "fav'rit:" "Lift up your heads, O ye gates: and

be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors." An odd, long text for framing. Those are her copper wire "native" bracelets there. "Oh, you don't have to look half smart on the parade, evenings!" That is her Church-service by her bed. He remembers that first night when he used it. Those are her best gloves, smoothed out there. That old stump of lead pencil lying upon them was his. He remembers it.

Look where she lies. On the threshold he pauses. That is old Mr. Bickers gone again on his knees against the bed, his white head bowed within his hands. That is Mrs. Bickers kneeling there, her lips moving. Brokenly now, such an odd, deep, trembling sound, comes Mr. Bickers' voice. Brokenly — jumbling his own words with words familiar. It is the prayer he had said was their daily prayer, and he jumbles it with other prayers and into it jumbles his own.

"Lord, now lettest —" Mr. Bickers stops; and there is long silence; and he begins again: "Lord, if it be thy will, if it be thy will, if it be thy will, if our Essie's suffering, if it be thy will, Lord, now lettest this thy servant, thy servant, depart in peace, in peace, in peace, according to . . . mine eyes have seen thy . . . through the tender mercies of our God whereby the dayspring . . . from on high . . . hath visited us. Amen. Amen."

Mrs. Bickers says "Amen." Mrs. Bickers collapses where she kneels. Mr. Bickers goes to her and raises her and says: "There, Mother! There, Mother, dear! Come and rest, Mother. Rest just a little while, Mother. Arthur's here. Arthur will stay by her. Arthur will tell us. Just a little while, Mother, dear."

She has no resistance. She is collapsed in his arms.

He supports her from the room. He says to Mr. Wriford: "I'll just lay her on her bed, Arthur. Just across the passage. Doors open. I'll hear you. The doctor's down-stairs. There, Mother! There, there, Mother."

Look where she lies. He is alone with her.

II

Come to this Mr. Wriford on his knees with her, his hands upon her hand, his head between his outstretched arms. Come to his revelation she has revealed to him; to that which came to him with sudden thought of Captain; come to his prayer.

"This is my dear, my darling, lying here. . . . I have looked back. I have looked back upon such pitiless review of all my blindness, that to look forward, to live and not destroy myself, is almost heavier than I can bear. . . . I will bear it. . . . I see. I understand. I accept. Self has been the cause of all my wreckage — thought of myself, always of myself and of no other. I see that now — clearly, bitterly, I see it. And yet — and yet, O God — in the very moment of seeing it, I still thought to kill myself. That was self again. I am so rooted in self that, in the very hour of my revelation, still only of myself I thought — only of saving myself by death from these my torments, only of ending them because I could not bear to let myself endure them. All my life I have lived in self. Ah, with my eyes open — deeper shame! deeper shame! — I almost had died in self. Ah, even realising that, still I cannot tear self out of me, still I kneel here dreading to live, fearing to live, crying that it is heavier than

I can bear, heavier than I can bear! Oh, what a thing is self that with such cunning can prevail, how deeply hidden, in what myriad forms disguised! Help me to see it. Keep my eyes open. Keep my eyes open. . . .

"Well, I accept then. I will not kill myself. . . . Lord, since I have accepted, use this my dear, my darling, no longer for me. . . . This is my dear, my darling, lying here beneath thy hand. She has offered her life for mine. Let it suffice, O God. Judge me apart from her. Judge me apart from her. Judge me apart from my darling. One life came to me to open my eyes. I remained blind. He gave the deeper sacrifice — blind in my blindness I remained. Then Essie. Thy servant. My jolly little Essie. If I had killed myself, if by destroying myself I had mocked her sacrifice, mocked Thee, O God, then mightest Thou by closing Thy hand upon her have pursued me even into hell. But I accept — but I accept, O God. Therefore relieve her — therefore relieve her — therefore let suffice that which she has done. . . .

"Am I daring to bargain? Am I stipulating, making terms, advancing a price? Remember, remember that I am new before Thee, long out of prayer, long unaccustomed to Thy ways. It is no bargain, O God. It is only confusion of these my thoughts. All that I ask is this — judge me apart from her, use her no longer for me, judge me no more through her, let that which she has done suffice. Look, I will go away from her and leave her. Whether, beneath Thy wisdom, she lives or dies shall nothing prevail with me. If she may live it shall not strengthen me — no bargain there, O God. If she must die it shall not shake me — O God, no bargain there. Judge me apart from her. I will

go out of her life. I will go out from every knowledge of Thy will towards her. I will not even pray for her. I will not even pray for her lest in my heart, beneath my words, beneath my thoughts, it is in cunning that actually I am here — agreeable to forego destruction of myself if I may know that she is spared; resolved to kill myself if I be guilty of her death. Enough — enough. Let me end with that while I have clearness of vision to see it. This is my dear, my darling, lying here. I will go out from all knowledge of her. Judge me apart from her. Let that which she has done suffice.”

He withdrew his hands from her hand as though in evidence of detaching himself from her. He thrust them out again to touch her and cried “Essie! Essie!” He then took them to his face.

He said: “Let me speak as a man. I will go out from her. I will live. Let me speak as a man. Let me not make vain promises, offer false protests. This is not religion. Religion, as it is lived, is nothing to me. Let me not delude myself nor seek in cunning to delude Thee. Let me not try to pretend that this that I have suffered converts me suddenly from that which I was to that which Essie is. Let me speak as a man. That is not of a moment. I am not one man in one moment, a new man in the next. I am the same. All my infirmities the same — rooted in me as my bones: bones of my spirit and no more changed than bones of my body that are rooted in my flesh. I am the same. Ay, even as I say it, I am tempted to say that I am not the same but am changed. Rescue me from that cunning. Keep me from that. Let me not even in cunning pretend, in self-delusion believe, that this hour, these thoughts, these torments I have endured will all my life remain

with me. I have known penitence before. I have knelt in presence of death before. I have wept. I have vowed. Where are my tears? Where my promises? Let me speak as a man. Time swings on. That which is all the world to-day is less than dust to-morrow, That which is laid, beneath death's shadow, in penitence before Thy feet, is there in ashes, when death has winged away, to mock Thy mercy. Time swings on. Vows made in penitence — they are no more than to the drunkard his drink: delusion, forgetfulness, anodyne, courage until the spirit that has tricked the brain has gone, until the travail that has worn the soul has ebbed. Back then to fear, to baseness, as surely as night succeeds to day. . . .

“What then? What do I purpose? What have I to offer? Lord, there is only this in me that is different: that my eyes are opened to that to which all my life they have been sealed. I have nothing to promise, nothing to vow. I have only to ask: Keep my eyes open; help me to remember this that my eyes have seen; help me to know what is self; help me to rid me of it. All my life — all my life from the beginning it has been self. Back in the London days when I was working day and night, when I was longing to be free, when I thought I was giving up my life to others, it was all self, self that was destroying me. It was not ceaseless work that wrought upon my peace of mind, robbed me of my youth; it was pitying myself, thinking of myself, contrasting my lot with that of others. It is not work nor trouble that kills a man, robs him of sleep, loses him his happiness — it is turning the stress of it inwards upon himself, never forgetting himself when occupied with it, always keeping himself before

his eyes, watching himself, pitying himself. Brida knew it. 'You think too much about yourself, Phil,' she used to tell me. That old Puddlebox had the secret of it and told it me plainly. 'You think too much about yourself, boy, and that is what's the matter with you and with most of us.' He told it to me plainly. 'I don't believe a word of it,' he told me when he had heard my story. 'Your story is the same as my story and the same as everybody else's story in this way: that you've never done anything wrong in all your life, and that all that's happened to you is what other folk have put upon you.' Ay, that was it! I thought I was sacrificing my life; I was grudging every thought of it, every moment of it given away from my own pursuits. How could I be sacrificing when in doing so I was unhappy? That is negation in terms. To sacrifice is happiness. Old Puddlebox showed it me. This my Essie showed it me. To give — to give time, money, life itself, and have compassion for oneself in giving them, that is the very pit of self, worse than self open and wilful. That is the selfishness that all my life has been my curse, my wreckage. All that ever has happened to me I have seen in terms of myself and of no other. Every trouble, every irritation that in those London days those poor things about me brought to me, I at once turned upon myself — looked at with my eyes, not with theirs; thought instantly and always, even while I helped them, how it affected me, not how it affected them. Ah, that is the heart of misery and that is the secret of happiness! To see only with one's own eyes, to judge only from one's own point, to estimate life in terms of self and of no other: that is to goad oneself on from trial to trial, from misery to mis-

ery. To see with others' eyes, to judge from their outlook upon life, to estimate life in terms of those upon whom life presses and not in terms of self: that is the secret of happiness, that is the thing in life that I have missed. . . .

"Try me not, O God, in great things. Help me in small. In the small things, in the small, the everyday things, O God, that is where self comes — that is where I shall not see it, that is where, disguised, it will deceive me. To quarrel, to complain, to be impatient — what is it but self? Help me to put myself where each one stands that comes about me. Help me to look with their eyes — how have vexation then? There is no vexation, there is no unhappiness in all this world but what through self a man brings into it. All happiness, this world — in every hour happiness, in every remotest corner happiness. But man lives not in it but in his own world — the world that he himself creates; of which he is the centre; that, however little he be, revolves about him. That is whence is his unhappiness. Others come into his world. Ah, if he can but watch them in it with their own eyes, not with his! God! what a world this world would be if under Thy hand it were governed as man governs the world which he himself creates — as I have governed mine! Tolerance for none but self, pity for none but self, all within it judged, measured, watched in terms of self! Rid me of that! Rid me of self. Help me to see self. Help me to see with others' eyes, not with my own. . . ."

So ends his prayer — so ends his vigil. Mr. Bickers returns, and it is towards daybreak. He looks once more at her, smiling, smiling there. He will not even

pray for her. Let that which she has done suffice. Let him be judged apart from her — not strengthened if she may live, not shaken if she must die. He goes down the stairs; out into young morning spreading across the sea.

CHAPTER XIV

PILGRIMAGE

I

NOR to know — in no way to be prevailed upon in this his return to life by knowledge of whether she lives or has died. In no way to be strengthened — but of himself to live — if life has been permitted her; in no way to be shaken if her life has been required. To be judged apart from her. . . .

Come with this Mr. Wriford while for a year he thus places in proof his acceptance. He takes up his life where on his flight from London he had left it. To do that — not to admit his every impulse which calls upon him to hide, to live in seclusion, and there dwell with his memories, cherish his affliction — is part of his bond pledged by her bedside. The secret of happiness has been purchased for him; let him not mock that which has been paid. He has the secret; let him exercise it. Abandonment to grief — what is that but pity of self? Life in retreat, unable to face the world — what is that but admission that his fate, that which affects himself, is harder than he can bear?

Bound up in this, he takes train immediately from Whitecliffe to London, presently is involved in all the tortures that his welcoming inflicts upon him. His return is made a sensation of the hour by his friends and

soon, as he finds, by that larger circle to whom his books have made him known. "Where have you been?" It is a question to which he seems to have to spend every hour of all his days in formulating some kind of answer. It is a question — and all the congratulation and felicitation that goes with it — that often he tells himself he can no longer stand and must escape. "Where have you been?" and all the while it is at Whitecliffe — in that room, among those scenes — that his heart is, and that he desires only to be left alone to keep there. But he does not escape. But he does not keep himself alone. It is self that bids him. It is self he has come out to know and face. He forces himself to see with the eyes of those that do them the kindnesses that are done him. He makes himself respond. He permits himself no shrinking.

He revisits Mr. and Mrs. Filmer. They have "got along very well without him," they tell him.

"I am bound to say," says Mrs. Filmer, "that at the time we thought your conduct showed very little consideration for us. I am bound to say that."

"A mere postcard," says Mr. Filmer, "can relieve much suspense; but one does not of course always think of duties to others, h'm, ha."

"Well, that's just what I am here to think of," Mr. Wriford responds. "Is there anything I can do? Any-thing you want?"

There is nothing, as it appears, except a manifestation of fear that he proposes to upset the establishment by quartering himself upon them, relief from which expands them somewhat, and they proceed with the news that two of the boys, his nephews, are on their way home on leave.

The boys come, and in their affairs and in their interests he finds better response to the "Anything I can do?" than was received from the Filmers. Till their arrival he has had, in seclusion of his rooms, intervals when he can retreat within his thoughts. There is a holiday home to be made for them, and he takes a flat and occupies himself with them, and these intervals are denied him. The young men are here to have a good time. There are their eyes for him to see with — not his own. He has a trick, they both notice it, of saying: "Well, tell me just how you look at the business." It is a trick that is expressed also in his manner, in a certain inviting, sympathetic way that he has, and it comes to be noticed in the much wider circle of his friends. "Used to be a fearfully reserved chap, Wriford," they say. "Never quite knew whether he was shy or thought himself too good for you. Do you notice how different he is now?"

"Do you ever notice him when he's alone, though — sitting in the club here and not knowing you're looking at him?" another would reply. "There's a look on his face then — he's been through it, Wriford, I'll bet money."

II

Ah, he has been through it and daily feels the mark of it. Time swings on. He settles down. The sensation of his return evaporates. His nephews go back to their duties. He settles down. This is his post — here in the hurly-burly. He will not desert it. He takes up his work again. Long days he sits staring at the blank sheets of paper before him. His thoughts are

ready. There obtrudes between them and the marshalling of them memories of how it had been planned he again was to resume them: "Won't I keep you quiet just, dear!" . . . That is self, pity for himself, grieving for himself. Let him put it away. Let him get to work. Let it return — ah, let her face, her voice, her jolly laughter return to him just for an hour when work is done, just while he lies awake. . . .

Come to this Mr. Wriford when a year is gone. Summer again — June again — the holidays again — again that day. He has lived through a year of it. Through a long year he has proved himself. If he might know certainly that she is dead, he could not fall back again. That is what he has feared at the outset. He does not fear it now. He has lived through a year of it. He is assured of himself now. If he might but make a pilgrimage to Whitecliffe, see where he had walked with her, see where perhaps she lies, permit his spirit to walk those roads, those paths, those fields with her again, suffer it to stand beside her. . . . !

He goes. He goes first, on a sudden fancy, to far Port Rannock and stands beside the mound that marks the grave he knows there.

"Well, you old Puddlebox," says Mr. Wriford, standing there. "Well, you old Puddlebox. How goes it? How goes it now? Well enough with you, old Puddlebox! You knew the secret. I know it now. Too late for me, old Puddlebox. But, if you know, you'll be shouting your praises on it, eh, old Puddlebox? What was it you said as the sea came on to us? 'Well, we've had some rare times together, boy, since first you came down the road.'"

He suddenly cried: "I would to God — I would to God you might shake off this earth, these stones, and come to me face to face for one moment while I clasped your hand!"

III

So on to Whitecliffe. So to his pilgrimage there. Just such another day awaits him as on that day a year ago. Sunshine and clouded sun, as he walks the parade. Presage of rain, as on through Yexley Green to Whitehouse he goes. Whitehouse still stands empty; he walks the garden, looks through the windows, tries the door, treads again the rooms where last he had walked with her. "Jolly little Essie's room" this was to have been. . . . This was where he would write. . . . This was where wouldn't she keep him quiet just! . . . She sat there while he told her . . .

Up the path to the cliff, along the cliff and past that place, paused long upon it, and on to Whitecliffe Church. Here is the churchyard. He knows all these old graves — he had peered here and here and here with Essie, puzzling their quaint inscriptions. It is for a new stone he looks. Yes, there is one. Three sides of the church he walks and only the old stones sees. Come to the porch, a new white cross confronts him. He goes to it. It is not hers! Sense tells him they would not have brought her here, would not have left her here. They would have taken her home. Yes, but that moment while he crossed the turf towards the cross, that moment while its letters came in view — and were not "Essie," — has shaken him so that his limbs tremble, so that he must somewhere rest . . . there is the porch.

A troop of noisy boys come through the gate, and then more boys by ones and twos. An old man who comes from within the church and looks out upon the churchyard for a moment remarks to him first that there is going to be a shower, then, calling out in reproof at a pair of the laughing boys, that it is choir-practice just going to begin. The old man returns to his duties; the last of the boys seem to have arrived: there are sounds within the church and premonitory notes of the organ; some heavy drops of the rain that has been threatening; then in a sudden stream the shower.

From where he sits he can see far up the road beyond the gate. He sees a group that had been approaching shelter beneath a distant tree. The downpour falls in a deluge that is fierce and short, passes and leaves the path in puddles, and with unnoting eyes he sees the group beneath the tree desert its shelter and come hurrying towards the church. The organ is playing now, voices swing in sudden volume of sound; unheeding, as with his eyes he is watching without seeing, he yet is subconsciously aware of the regular rise and fall of psalms.

With his eyes unseeing! They suddenly, as he watches, declare to him that which sets a drumming in his head, a snatching at his breath. The group has reached the gate. It is an old man drawing a wicker bath-chair, an old lady walking behind it. Drumming in his head; it passes; there succeeds to it a rocking of all the ground about his feet, a swimming, a receding, a swift approaching of all the land beyond the porch. That old man is opening the gate, turning his back to draw the bath-chair carefully through, revealing one that sits within it, coming on now . . . coming on now . . . closer and closer and closer. . . .

This Mr. Wriford simply stands there. He doesn't do anything, and he doesn't say anything. He can't. You see, he has been through a good deal for a good long time. This is the end of a long passage for him. You know how weak he is. You probably despise him. Well, then, despise him now. He has no parts, no qualities, for this. He makes a bungling business of it. He has come to the doorway of the porch and simply stands there. They have seen him. They are staring at him. They are saying things. They are exclaiming. He doesn't hear. He just stands there. . . .

Then he begins. He jolts down off the step of the porch. He stumbles along the few paces to the bath-chair. She that is seated there gives a kind of laugh and a kind of cry. He falls on his knees, kneeling in puddles, and puts his arms out, and takes her in them, and catches her to him, and buries his face against her, and holds her, holds her — and has nothing at all that he can say, not even her name.

Well, nor has she. She just has her arms about him. . . . When at last she speaks, Mr. and Mrs. Bickers have gone — into the church, or into the air, or into the ground — gone somewhere for some reason. And even then it is not at first speech but some odd little sound that she makes, and at that he looks up and she stoops to him — and there they are, her cheek against his cheek.

"My back's a fair old caution," says Essie then. "They don't think I'll ever walk again."

He stammers something about "I'll carry you, dear. I'll carry you."

Each in the other's arms, her cheek against his cheek.

"Just going to Whitehouse, we were," says Essie.

"My goodness, if it hadn't rained and made us come for shelter!"

He says something about: "It's empty — it's still empty for us — Whitehouse."

Some one opens the church door. Young voices and music that have been muffled come streaming through towards them —

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord: or who shall rise up in his holy place?

Even he that hath clean hands and a pure heart: and that hath not lift up his mind unto vanity, nor sworn to deceive his neighbour.

A sound escapes him. He feels a sudden moisture from her face to his. The singing goes deeper; then with triumphant surge and sweep breaks out again:

Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors. . . .

"What, are you crying too?" says Essie. "Aren't we a pair of us, though?"

THE END



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